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“Closer to the Objective”: Following Helen from Troy to Chicago

A Thesis Presented

by

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MAY 2019

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“Closer to the Objective”: Following Helen from Troy to Chicago

A Thesis Presented

by

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Bridgewater State University

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ABSTRACT

“Closer to the Objective”: *Following Helen from Troy to Chicago* looks at the function of women in war and war-adjacent texts. Women are contextualized against the figure of Helen of Troy, who sets the standard for how women in war narratives have historically been treated in literature in film. The war narrative has existed as long as literature itself as existed, and in the Western canon, storytellers are constantly looking back at the Iliad, which serves as an Ur text in terms of how the war narrative--and in particular, the American war narrative--continues to be told today. Those American-centric war narratives still place the emphasis on male experiences in war, elevating a Soldier-Defender character and his fight against the Enemy-Other. The trends of the war narrative spill over from the genre and into others, making what happens in the war narrative—and more specifically, what happens to women in the war narrative--reflective of almost all American media. So often when women are allowed appearances in these narratives, however, they are made into objects and ghosts.

This thesis is concerned with the appearance of women in war narratives and how those appearances reflect against the actual experiences of women in war. While war narratives largely focus on the psychological impacts of war on men, about their masculinity and problems with masculinity, women are rarely given more visibility in war narratives apart from their role as romantic interests; indeed, even Helen of Troy’s primary function in the Iliad has to do with how she is desired by multiple men. Women’s experiences in the war narrative often boil down to their sexual availability, which is a problem given the widespread epidemic of the use of rape as a weapon of war, and the general devaluing of women’s personhood in both media and real life. Because

the role of women across war narratives is so similar, it is possible to use an archetype to describe them; as Carol Clover's *Final Girl* provides a means for describing the role of heroines in the horror movie genre, so too does "*Closer to the Objective*" use the Helen-Figure or Helen Surrogate to codify the role of women in the war narrative. The primary texts examined in this work include the traditional war narratives the *Iliad*, against which comparisons are made; the biblical Book of Judith, which offers an alternative to the Helen-figure; Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* (2004); David Ayer's *Fury* (2011); Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* (2009); and *Band of Brothers* (2001); as well as the non-traditional and war adjacent texts of Spike Lee's *Chi-Raq* (2015); the *Odyssey*; poetry by Sappho about Helen of Troy; and Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad*. The war genre's relationship to the superhero genre allows for a brief elaboration about that family tree between Joss Whedon's *Avengers* (2012) at the same time that it allows for criticism of the superhero genre from writers Gail Simone and Kelly Sue DeConnick to enter the conversation about the treatment of women in war. Other theoretical lenses in use in "*Closer to the Objective*" include war criticism from voices like Michael Walzer and Elaine Scarry; criticism of the historical fiction genre from Maria Margaronis; the treatment of the pain of others by Susan Sontag; and the language of how women are viewed from Mary Beard and Laura Mulvey. It contextualizes itself in the real world through the research done by Charlotte Lindsey of the International Committee of the Red Cross in the work *Women Facing War*, as well as statistics that UNICEF and RAINN have provided on the treatment of women in both combat zones and here at home in the United States.

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Introduction

Americans don't have a hard time admitting that they enjoy war movies. They're as much a part of the cultural cinema experience as the superhero movie and the horror movie and the romantic comedy. Sometimes, the war movie is all of those genres, too. It is a deeply American genre, though the war narrative itself predates America by millennia; the war movie then might be America's attempt as a culture to relate back to something significantly older than itself in the same way government buildings favor Greco-Roman architecture and the way classrooms reorganize themselves periodically into Socratic seminars. There's also the fact that America's relationship with war is as an origin story rather than one of destruction or the loss of civilization: from the cannon fire of the American Revolution, We became a Nation. It is therefore difficult for Americans to divorce themselves from the idea of war as a necessary, or from the heroic rhetoric of war, because without it, there may not have been an America (at least as it exists now) at all. What America *does* have a hard time admitting to is that there is something wrong with the way we all engage with war in media, and the problems that exist in the American War Narrative—particularly when it comes to women.

I want to admit something: I too enjoy war movies. I could say that I don't know why, but I'd be lying. There is a deep-seated desire to engage with these kinds of texts that has always existed within me. Even from childhood, Americans are exposed to the language of war in the way children's literature is riddled with fictional battles between elves and wizards, between rebels and empires (how fittingly American)—so that when it comes time for us to finally grow up, it makes sense that this is the language in cinema that we still gravitate towards. My personal like or dislike for the war narrative is largely

irrelevant to the fact that culturally, Americans have a great fondness for the war narrative, and even further than that, almost all of Western civilization does, too. History has largely—since the introduction of social history around the 1950s and 60s—been a record of first war, then politics, and it has mostly been told by the people who were winning those wars.

The war narrative itself is one of the oldest traditions in Western literature, and interestingly, not a lot has changed between Homer's *Iliad* and contemporary war narratives which have found such a prominent home in American cinema. What must be acknowledged, however, about the war narrative is that there's also an enormous part of that tradition which relies upon the exploration of human suffering. Many war narratives in recent American traditions (both literary and cinematic) may appear to be created with the purpose of showing war in its realities of brutality—but this should mean that those narratives have the capacity to elevate the position of human suffering as often as they are capable as showing human suffering as lowly. In witnessing the war narrative, audiences become both observers of alleged fact and the suffering of others (both emotional suffering and the simulated physical suffering on screen), as well as people in the position to engage with and even potentially experience some of that suffering themselves. But those representations of suffering are complicated because of America's own cultural relationship with war, and the audience's individual experience or inexperience with it firsthand.

In the short docuseries *Five Came Back* (2018, Netflix), which details war filmmaking efforts during World War II, interviewees who are contemporary directors and actors share their own anecdotal stories and knowledge of how those WWII movies

were being made. One of the directors profiled is Frank Capra, whose primary job during the war was to create the series morale-boosting documentary series *Why We Fight*. While speaking about Capra, Francis Ford Coppola mentions an anecdotal conversation where Capra once said that if he ever made a pro-war film to “just shoot him,” which was a response to criticism that his films were too anti-war for the U.S. at the height of WWII—but this begs the question of what the *Why We Fight* series was supposed to be for in the first place then, if not to tell soldiers why they need to be fighting. Later in the same episode, Coppola deals with a related issue: no matter how anti-war a war film wants to be, the fact remains that the action of war—what gets included in “war movies” and what separates the “war movie” from any other historical drama—is exciting, and it’s hard *not* to find it exciting as either the person creating the war film (like Coppola) or the audience member. In making a movie like *Apocalypse Now*, which Coppola in this instance is arguing as an anti-war movie, it is still hard not to get swept up in the drama.

Maybe this attitude towards violence is gendered; maybe there is a particularly masculine impulse to find war, as repulsive as it must be, still fascinating if not enjoyable as consumable media. The filmmakers interviewed in *Five Came Back* are, after all, entirely men. This is impossible to ignore despite Meryl Streep’s even-keeled and disembodied narrative voice. While Streep’s narrative voice is as distant in tone from its subject matter as any other narrator might be (her voice is similar to that of a narrator for a nature documentary), the absolute absence of women as present and personal authorities on the subject of war and war films in contrast to her spectral voice provides an immediate contrast to the bodied male filmmakers. Men get to be seen while women are not. That contrast exists even in largely fictitious war narratives, where women play

the roles of objects and ghosts more often than they get to be a lively, personal presence in front of the viewfinder. That the entirety of the interviewees in the short series are men suggests another idea—one that's existed for a long time in the history of war literature criticism, as noted by Paul Fussell—and it's that war is the domain of men to speak on. War is something that belongs to men, no matter how many women become involved in it.

Our cultural attitude is that not only war but all violence is considered inherently masculine, that violence and even the innate capacity for violence itself is something that is gendered. Laurie Anderson mentions in another Netflix documentary, *Feminists: What Were They Thinking?*, that women are not aggressive by nature. This is an attitude shared by many Americans and surely many others worldwide, though here in America (and to an extent, Great Britain) the attitude towards what a woman is and what a woman isn't can be traced back to what Barbara Welter described as the Cult of True Womanhood. There are traits that apply to women, and violent or aggressive are typically not included in that list. One feminist take on women and violence and aggression is that, generally, women don't have a need to be violent. If the world were ruled by women, there would be no wars. It's true that in peacekeeping efforts between groups who have been in conflict with each other that there's a higher chance of success when women are equally included in those discussions (as noted recently by the Bulletin of the Atomic regarding the U.S./N. Korean talks of February, 2019). Often, as was the case in France pre-WWI, women will argue against going to war. Perhaps there's also a socio-biological argument to be made too that it's much harder to raise children in places where there is violence—whether it's what we may traditionally consider a conflict zone like Vietnam or Europe

during WWII, or if it's the war-like gang violence that we see in cities like Chicago in the United States—and because the responsibility of raising children has historically fallen to women, it is in the best interest of those women to argue against violence. Whatever the reasoning is, there remains the persistent (and outdated) argument that women are just not aggressive creatures.

I reject this.

Women, like men, are just as capable of aggression, of violence, of violent acts. There is less literature on women as perpetrators of violence than as victims of it, even in literature of psychology, but this does not mean it does not happen. Women's violence is different from men, but there's a finality to a woman coming to fight that is absent from language about men in war, where war is a contest between two sides. For women, it's not about who's stronger. Geoff Johns' Wonder Woman tells Superman that "There's a reason I don't have a list of villains as long as Bruce's, Barry's, or even yours. When I deal with them, I *deal* with them," (*Justice League* #22, 2013). Likewise, when Judith comes back to her people after beheading Holofernes, she brings with her peace. Currently, between 2018 and 2019, there has been a new wave in film and literature exploring feminine anger and expressions of feminine violence, from the memoir to the novel to poetry to on screen in horror and comedies about motherhood. Women as well as men get excited by violence (fictional or actual), and often, women are complicit in violence too whether it's against men or other women. In "Cruelty in Literature," Sue Rainsford references specifically female culpability for violence in Claire Vaye Watkin's "Rondine al Nido," but we see this in Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, and plenty of episodes of *Law & Order: SVU*, too. We

are all, regardless of gender, capable of committing atrocities against other human beings—and even, sometimes, being excited by those atrocities and the depictions of them, as in the war narrative. Implying that women are somehow less capable of that level of violence against other bodies does several things: it removes the culpability of women to account for participating in systems of violence (which often harm other women) because they are allegedly incapable or unaware of the harm of their own actions, and it puts women on a pedestal of morality which is ultimately unsustainable and keeps women from being seen as equals to their likewise-flawed male peers. This is the other thing that happens to women in narratives about violence: we are made unreal by the idealization of what women ought to be when violence is happening around them and to them. The war narrative is subject to these kinds of problems—the turning of women into ghosts and the objectifying of them—in particular.

So what do we get from war narratives? There must be some satisfaction from watching simulated scenes of violence—violence which is at times more real than for instance the violence present in the horror movie, because war narratives carry the suggestion that things like this really have happened while the horror movie typically relishes in its fantasy, but is still somehow less real because it is impossible to replicate what has actually happened, whether on screen or in print. I think of a line from Adrienne Rich: “Blood making everything more real”—like the existence of blood and its presence in these narratives provides veracity that the damage and trauma has happened. It doesn’t matter that it’s Ben Nye Fresh Scab makeup that’s over the actor’s eyebrow, stippled on and given fake charcoal powder and cream paint to make it look like a deeper gash—it’s still there, and the suggestion that beneath the skin there is something pulsing reminds the

audience of the ultimately frailty of the body—both his, and ours. Audiences watch and read war narratives for the same reasons they engage with any media: to experience a life they will not live. These particular experiences have been deemed culturally important, or else those of us who have never stepped foot on a battlefield or hid in a foxhole or been in any other war-place wouldn't have a reason to keep talking about them decades or centuries or millennia after the fact.

It is impossible to understand the myth of America without watching a war movie or reading a war story. *The Things They Carried* is read as often by high school students as *Romeo and Juliet*, and has the added benefit of not needing a contemporary translation. Because the war narrative is as old as literature itself, it must be talked about again and again. It isn't going anywhere, and we're still seeing different iterations of it being produced, often for popular consumption. Because women are affected by war and conflict, their appearances and roles in media depicting war must also be discussed, analyzed, criticized. This thesis does that work.

Women in war narratives, they are ghosts or objects or otherwise turned into them. When they appear, they are spectral; their deaths are anticipated. They play romantic roles which do a disservice to women when they comprise their entire character arcs, because those reinforce the argument that this is the only way in which women's stories are valuable and deserve to be told. Perhaps by my consumption of the contemporary war narrative I've been participatory in a cycle which reduces female characters to these slight roles, but then, all audiences participate in the validation of these representations of women. Since the Ur text of the Western War Narrative, Homer's *Iliad*, we've been considering women in relation to men and a sexuality defined

more by sexual violence than by women's agency, and to what degree their stories exist as tragedy or comedy has to do with their class, race, and aesthetic privileges over other women. Helen of Troy, after all, gets to go back to Sparta. There may be a debate as to whether or not she wants to even be in Sparta, but comparatively there are worse husbands than Menelaus. Emphasizing the inequality of women's experiences even when they're both physically at the site of conflict is the contrast of Cassandra, who is pulled from the temple, raped, and then murdered by her rapist's estranged wife. At any point, a woman can become Cassandra: not believed, and made to bear threats of future violence against their bodies. The enjoyment experienced watching this kind of narrative is not the same kind that Coppola describes about the action of a battle scene—at best it is catharsis, knowing that someone else in the audience is also experiencing this *thing*, and feels for the Cassandras of the various war narratives what all women need to have felt for them when they are in her place. Audiences watch these things to cope with a trauma that is, unfortunately, almost universal among women, and so it hurts when those fictional women are not treated with dignity, whether in a movie about WWII or even centuries after Homer by Greek playwrights.

These are not the only possibilities for women in war narratives, though it may feel as though Helen-Surrogate is the role they are overwhelmingly placed into. When women are not solely the object of desire—or the objective of war—of a narrative, that becomes subversive. The biblical Judith is a widow who completes a miraculous fast after the death of her husband and goes on to save her people from certain conquest and likely cultural annihilation. She has to use her body to do it, following the expectation of how women are allowed to operate within war—but she's still the one beheading

Holofernes at the end. Sometimes, Judith is allowed to come through in contemporary war narratives such as *Inglourious Basterds* (2010), though she is an exception to the general rule.

This thesis discusses women in war narratives. It also gets into the specifics of the war narrative genre, where women fit in that genre, and how war seeps into the language of seemingly unrelated media. Often, it feels like discussing women in media is a lot like elbowing through a packed subway platform full of men, trying to get onto the train before the doors shut. The space is not already open, it must be made.

Discussed in this thesis are the following works that fit within the traditional war narrative genre: Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; the biblical Book of Judith; *The Trojan Women*; *Troy* (2004); *Fury* (2014); *Saving Private Ryan* (1998); *Band of Brothers* (2001); and *Inglourious Basterds* (2011). Also discussed are texts adjacent to these war narratives, including: poems about Helen by Sappho; Aristophanes's *Lysistrata*; *Suite Francaise* (2014); Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad*. The genre relationship between superhero narratives, war narratives, and epics like the *Iliad* open the door for discussion on works such as *The Avengers* (2011), *Wonder Woman*, and *Captain Marvel* at the same time it permits the borrowing of criticism from the comic book field from authors Gail Simone and Kelly Sue DeConnick. Likewise, media which features unconventional warfare or unconventional war narratives like Spike Lee's *Chi-Raq* (2015)—which plays heavily into understanding a relationship between classical texts and contemporary media—and the *Legend of Zelda* series come into conversation, as does *Star Trek*; the language of the war narrative is pervasive throughout popular media. This thesis takes an approach to the war narrative using the criticism of scholars such as Susan Sontag, Elaine

Scarry, Mary Beard, Michael Walzer, Maria Margaronis, and gets into the problems of the war film presented by Lawrence Weschler. It uses language of voyeurism borrowed from the horror criticism of Laura Mulvey.

It begins with the discussion of women in real areas of conflict, using data from the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) and Charlotte Lindsey's *Women Facing War: ICRC Study on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Women* report (2001).

Women in Areas of Violence

(RAINN, Charlotte Lindsey's ICRC report, UNICEF Reports)

What we say about women in conflict is a reflection of how women at peace (or relative peace) will also be treated, fictional or not. America is at an interesting (frightening) point where violence—mass, widespread violence, often committed with weapons of war—is reported on literally every single minute of every single day from some 24-hour news source or another. Gun violence, yes, but sexual violence, too, often underreported. Sexual violence *is* something that is gendered, and it is constant, and it is faced by women in war and conflict zones as well as by women who are not. Rape is weapon of war just as much as a gun is. Sexual violence is used as a silencing tactic, both in real life and online. Because rape continues to be a weapon of war—whether thought of in terms of widely reported crimes against humanity of which there are too many to list, but which include what has happened in Bosnia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Burma, Rwanda, and Sri Lanka—we must consider the ramifications for how we justify rape outside of war, too, and what makes it much more likely to be used as a tool of war. It is never about sexual attraction, but power.

In 1996, UNICEF described the use of rape and sexual violence as a tactic of ethnic cleansing; it is part of the destruction of the world of the individual that Scarry describes as what war does: war is the “active...dissolution of civilization” (87) through means of total destruction. The community is destroyed by the efforts made to isolate and ostracize the girls who are raped (and who subsequently become pregnant), ensuring that “disintegration of the family” (UNICEF) at the same time that the girls and women themselves are left violated, humiliated, and more vulnerable to additional violence, both

at the hands of other members of the militia and from her own family. There are international laws meant to protect specifically civilian women in conflict zones from sexual violence (though these laws extend to the protection of women who take an active part in the hostilities, as well); though as Charlotte Lindsey observes multiple times in her report for the ICRC, *Women Facing War*, those laws do little for most women because the objective of war is total destruction. For militias who are unconcerned with international law that was established to make war somehow more civil, the only reason to actually obey those laws would be to legitimize themselves to an outside body (this is something Michael Walzer mentions, too). The law assumes that all participating groups in the conflict will follow it, which is not even true of the armies during WWII, nor even armies today. As long as rape is as effective a tool of war as a gun in terms of destruction of community and personhood, of course militias and armies are going to still deploy it as a method to reaching their end goal of out-injuring (to use Scarry's language) the other side. Some of the biggest value from Lindsey's report, though it's almost two decades old, is that it speaks to the fact that we have the experiences of female survivors of war available: their voices are not only to be received through what men may imagine those experiences to be. While Lindsey's report focuses on the civilian woman (not girls and not children) rather than those of who in the report are described as "combatant" women, it still provides a voice as to what has happened to women, what is happening to women, and what will likely continue happening to women for the foreseeable future—with the authority of the International Committee of the Red Cross to back that research up.

America likes to think itself better than other countries in this regard, but it's not. Women are just as likely to be beaten, degraded, and abused in America as anywhere

else. Women are acceptable targets for violence here, where America claims to be better, every day, because women even now are not considered completely human in the same way that men are. When it becomes the Enemy-Other committing these same crimes against women, only then is it easy to condemn the act, and not in order to provide support to the victim, by to reaffirm the falsehood that it could never happen here, despite the fact that it does.

America is an astoundingly violent country—but since America itself (in the country's origin myth) came from a violent revolution, to condemn violence would be to condemn the beginning. It is the American attitude then that violence itself must be permitted. Without violence, it is impossible to have heroes in the American tradition. Even when the arena of contest is not war, as in the case of sports, the language used to describe the heroic are transformed into the language of the war narrative. These are battles. These are militaristic strategies to outperform (and again, out-injure) the opponent.

Women complicate the war narrative because it is much harder to show audiences exactly what happens to women in war than it is to use special effects to simulate the effect of blowing a man's legs off with any kind of explosive weapon. That kind of bodily mutilation, though gut-wrenching in its own way, is still palatable to an especially American audience, who has little issue with violence. That kind of war violence—the body mutilation via weaponry—is also outside the realm of the everyday for the majority of Americans, with perhaps the exception of those who work in trauma centers and as paramedics, who may regularly see dismemberment caused by other machines (most commonly, probably, automobiles). The act of holding down a woman on screen while

she screams and is violated (repeatedly, even), on the other hand—RAINN estimates that 1 in every 6 American women have been the victims of attempted or completed rape. It is still underreported. And while men are also victims of sexual assault both in America and in areas of foreign conflict (RAINN reports that about 1 in every 33 American men have experienced sexual assault, though because it also goes underreported by its victims, this number may not be accurate), 9 out of every 10 rape victims in the U.S. are women.

What this says about the relationship between men and women in America is that it may not be all that much better than men and women anywhere else in the world, and particularly not that much better than women in areas of conflict as described by Lindsey. Further, the difference may be accentuated by the fact that while Lindsey's report makes the assumption that the majority of these women are being raped and otherwise assaulted by men of a different militia group (though sometimes this is not the case), women in America are largely assaulted by men they know. It is not always the boogeyman in the alley, as women are still cautioned against—he exists too—but sometimes it is a spouse, a brother, an uncle, a friend. Because rape cannot be brushed off and discussed merely as a side-effect of conflict (unless the argument is that America is at conflict with itself, which may also be true but is a different conversation), this could explain why it doesn't find its way so often into war movies as the bodily trauma inflicted by metal weapons. To have one's legs removed is more unusual or unique than being raped in America. This is not an argument that there needs to be more rape scenes in media—they're not generally handled well even when studios hire experts on the matter, and, to quote Rainsford, who's responding to Maggie Nelson in this case, "Having seen countless portrayals of sexualized cruelty, I couldn't say there was any meaningful shift between my first and

hundredth response; the queasy devastation hadn't become any more nuanced, and although it lingered it was never formative." There are presentations of rape in media which exist and do not subject the audience to the same trauma over and over again, but by and large the rape scene as it exists is gratuitous, exploitative, and not meant for women who are attempting to overcome trauma, as is sometimes suggested of violent media such as the war narrative and horror movie, but rather for a voyeuristic and assumed masculine audience who enjoys seeing women put directly in harm's way for nothing but the sake of getting to see them violated. This becomes reiterated when even non-sexual violence becomes sexualized by a camera's gaze as a woman is dying on screen.

The problem then becomes that, despite the fact that the war narrative by and large does not want to deal with this particular reality of women in conflict—even though so many war storytellers purport to want to get to the truth of conflict—often when women appear in war narratives, they're surrounded by sexuality. It's the sexually violent proclivities of male soldiers; it's her own sexual-romantic interest in the men (virtually never the women) around her; it's her sexual desirability or availability and both in combination with how that affects the male soldiers near her. In a world where women in war zones are disproportionately likely to be victims of sexual violence and assault, where there rape of women is one of the most effective tools of war next to artillery, where women in general are valued for their assumed sexual desirability and are killed even outside of war zones for denying that availability to the men around them, it is as condemnable for narratives to only focus on women through this one facet as it would be for a war narrative to ignore the fact that the goal of war is to injure the Enemy-Other.

Reasons to Be Suspicious of the War Narrative | Elements of the War Narrative and Related Genres

(Relationship between war narrative and other genres; The Iliad; Weschler; Elaine Scarry; Legend of Zelda; Star Trek; Just and Unjust Wars; Suite Francaise; Post-9/11 war movies; superheroes and the Avengers)

If the question were whether or not we should be suspicious of the motives behind a war narrative, the easiest answer would be to say that it behooves audiences to be critical and suspicious of all of the media they consume. The question of what to be suspicious of when it comes to the war narrative is, however, much more complex than whether or not it should be approached suspiciously at all.

There is an inherently exploitative aspect of the contemporary war narrative in the same way that any media that shows or revels in violence—violence against the body, against women, against humanity in general—is bound to be. The audience becomes voyeur, observer non-active participant in the destruction of the body on screen for the purpose of being, for the most part, entertained. The easiest match to the exploitative element found in the contemporary war film is best made to the horror film. There exists an overlap in themes between the two—good versus evil and the assault from an Enemy-Other against the hero—as well as the acts which are committed on screen in both. The horror film, like many “realistic” war narratives, finds itself enjoying the act of mutilation, and the special effects pioneered within the context of horror for the purpose of making the gore more real find themselves at home in war movies and mini-series in which there is plenty of on-screen violence and destruction of the human body. Violence and the simulated threat of it against the viewer exist as a major part of the viewing experience of both genres. But if these are exploitative genres (and plenty has been

written on the fact that horror alone *is*), then there's the problem of why: why an audience would watch these movies and read these books which are frequently distressing, and which profit on depictions of pain—the pain of actual people who have lived and died (sometimes in the ways that are documented in the fiction on screen) and people who may not have been real in the historical sense but then at least are representations of those people based on presumed truths about war. Audiences continue to watch these movies and read these novels even when the advertising telling us to do so has largely been eliminated, and even when these movies and novels are not always particularly good.

Another reason to be suspicious of the war narrative, beyond its exploitative capabilities, is the motivation behind those who make war narratives in the first place. While Coppola's earlier anecdotal evidence suggests that perhaps Capra did not think he was creating pro-war films, the fact remains that they were created in conjunction with the War Office for the point of educating soldiers about what their job was supposed to be in the *Why We Fight* series. A film does not necessarily have to be propaganda in the mode of Goebbels in order to be pro-war. Likewise, even anti-war films have the capacity to be pro-war, and there is a relationship between films which use military property and the Pentagon itself. No media exists within a vacuum apart from politics or even apart from harm that has been done to actual people. It is impossible to watch a war narrative—particularly a WWII narrative, a war of which there are hundreds of firsthand accounts—and not be aware of the fact that not only did actual people likely die in the ways that are at times callously presented on screen, but that a good majority of actual people *did not* die in those ways, and that even the presentation of death in a war film can

participate in a glorification of the war death. Even beyond the fact that the war narrative has been used as a propaganda tool (both as pro- and anti-war), art inherently takes sides: the question is not whether or not the war narrative is political, but if there is a human propaganda aspect to it. The transcendent nature of the war narrative—that is, the fact that it seems to exist beyond its creation date—means that it is both larger than local politics at the same time that it allows local politics to be applied to it. Since the war narrative is transnational and transhistorical—we retell similar if not exactly the same stories over and over again—then the human elements of the war narrative *should* outweigh contemporary politics attached to a given work. That does not mean that the war narrative is pro-humanist (often, it's not). It does, however, mean that for all the times a work like the *Iliad* has continued to be adapted and played with by various creators over its almost 3,000 year history, not all of those adaptations have much to do with the local politics Homer may have associated with it, but they all have seen the politics of their own era of production. The story of Achilles continues to be told not necessarily because there's a contemporary concern with trading conflicts in the Aegean all these years later (though trading conflicts certainly do still exist), but because Achilles himself continues to resonate. His anger, his grief, and his abilities are still interesting. Further, there are some eternal problems associated with war—like loss, violence, humility and honor, power—which get represented regardless of how people are killing each other in any given decade. Even war narratives which are not direct adaptations of the *Iliad* often fit into a framework which it has established; war narratives in the Western canon owe a great deal to Homer.

Another consideration: whether a filmmaker in particular makes a war narrative with the intention of producing a work of art which is distinctly anti-war, the same problem mentioned in the introduction of this thesis of the excitement which which Coppola describes existing within the fight sequences of the war film makes this somewhat impossible. In the Harper's Magazine article "Valkyries Over Iraq: the trouble with war movies," Lawrence Weschler gets into that impossibility through discussions with Sam Mendes, Anthony Swofford, and Walter Murch about the war movie, springing off in part from Swofford's own accounts of having watched Vietnam movies with other Marines as a way of getting amped up for their own battles. Weschler quotes Swofford: "Filmic images of death and carnage are pornography for the military man...It doesn't matter how many Mr. and Mrs. Johnsons are antiwar—the actual killers who know how to use the weapons are not." For all the people who may watch depictions of violence (whether horror or war movies) as a way of experiencing trauma in a safe environment, and thus in a way that removes the ability of the violence to be overpowering and degenerative, there will always be someone who takes enjoyment in the depictions of brutalized bodies. The intention of the creator of the war narrative at that point doesn't matter when it comes to what people are ultimately taking away from the narrative itself, and that may not be the fault of the storyteller, but rather a fault of the genre itself. The question often asked is whether or not violent media provides an outlet for aggression that prevents actual violence or if it provokes violent impulses (often discussed in relation to young adult males—the same ones who would wind up being soldiers), and a definitive answer is as evasive as it is personal to the media consumer. Despite the fact that the war narrative is used in a way that encourages young men to go to war, and to

want to fight and, most importantly, to want to kill, the filmmakers that Weschler interviews admit that even if that's the case, they still wouldn't be responsible, since their responsibility is to the truth of the depiction of war. This supposes that all war narratives are attempting to relay the truth—whatever the “truth” of war is—and that there is even “truth” that can be told. While most of these filmmakers also acknowledge a cyclic nature of the war narrative in encouraging young men to fight and then that fighting produces more war narratives (sometimes with the hope that war will not be repeated, sometimes with the hope that it will be), the comparison I can't help but make is to Homer's description of Achilles's shield. Perhaps war will repeat itself whether the story is told or not, but if it's going to come out anyway, storytellers might as well commit themselves to the truth of war, of its transcendence beyond their own temporal/spatial positions.

At the same time that the war narrative has a very clear and most likely universal human appeal, it is necessary to talk about the fact that it dehumanizes as much as it humanizes participants in a conflict. This is not the fault necessarily of the war narrative, but of war itself. The nature of war is to dehumanize because one of the aims which Elaine Scarry describes of war is to injure and ultimately to destroy by injuring: dehumanize the enemy soldiers, so it is easier to live with killing another person (they are, after all, no longer people); dehumanize the civilians in areas of conflict (when there is no way to differentiate between “civilian” and “hostile”, the death of civilians is unavoidable); dehumanize the soldier himself so that he does not feel guilt over his actions, particularly when they are acts of atrocity—the destruction of consciousness—against other human beings. Those who fight are dehumanized in war, but those who are fought for in war narratives can also be dehumanized; Helen is more of a trophy than a

character in some Trojan War retellings, and women are often left at home and talked about in terms of what they can do for the male soldiers more than what the conflict also does to them. Because these texts are manipulated by actual people, too, the depiction and treatment of female characters is an active decision made by storytellers.

Women in war narratives are often metaphors for something else, anything else except for actual people, and therefore are rarely as fully-formed as the humanized-dehumanized-rehumanized male soldiers who often appear beside them. Men become monsters in war narratives, though sometimes the narrative claims that this is because men have always been monsters, and it is only in war that we see the true nature of man. This is more of a justification for behavior than a reason behind it; that argument is permissive of the kind of brutality that men commit against other men and women because they can't help but do so, especially in war, when that isn't true. Men are perfectly capable of preventing themselves from assaulting others, and make the choice when to and when not to—but this is one of the arguments that the war narrative is in service of. War may be an external event, something that is brought about by the gods or nature (or both) and which cannot be stopped, or it may be something internal which lives inside men (and it is almost always men who are discussed in these terms, as though women do not ever factor into the violent struggle for survival) and which will always dig its way back to the surface. The war narrative often provides the argument that war itself is unavoidable.

While it is not a conventional war narrative, a work which describes the constant struggle against an inherent, anticipated evil in the world would be Nintendo's *Legend of Zelda* series. It even bears a resemblance to the American war narrative because it favors

a singular hero—Link, and his many iterations through different generations—returning time and time again to face off against a great, omnipresent evil—Ganon—who takes a variety of forms but who is always lingering, ready to come back and disrupt periods of prosperity. The tapestries which show up in many of the recent games in the series are another version of Achilles’s shield: they depict the constant cycle of war and peace as part of civilization in the same way that work and play are, and it never goes away, whether the darkness comes from man’s heart or outside of it. Whether the war is actively present in the narratives audiences engage with or if the media is war-adjacent, as *Zelda* is, there is still the constant fear of evil and particularly the evil of world-destroying, culture annihilating war. But that notion should also be criticized: when the war or war-adjacent narrative embraces the idea that war is unavoidable—and in fact, must be conquered by each subsequent generation—regardless of how many times people may come together for peace, it is making the argument that in some way, war is something to be expected and to a degree accepted for what it is, when in reality there is no reason why audience members should embrace war as a natural state of being human. Other than the media which announces war as natural, there is no evidence which suggests people are at their best or at their most natural selves when they are at war. It is *not* natural; in *Just and Unjust Wars*, Michael Walzer makes the very clear distinction that “Wars are not self-starting” (31), that there are agents who put war into action and that it does not come from nowhere. We should not accept the inevitability of war because it takes action by men to create war. The war and war-adjacent narrative which assumes the inevitability of war is, regardless of however anti-war it wants to be, ultimately a pro-war narrative.

Because of what the war narrative aims to describe—that is, the literal injuring of others—it cannot escape what conflict does to the people in it and the people in proximity to it. Whether the war narrative has aims to be moralizing in the way that it shows the goodness of people in times of extreme hardship, or if it aims to show how awful people can be to each other for no real reason except that some superior office instructed them (or did not instruct them) to do so, the war narrative, if it is actually committed to telling the truth, like the filmmakers who Weschler interviewed claim it is, still has to show the pain which others inflict. It is disingenuous of a war narrative not to acknowledge the act of injuring. That war narratives in film are not only produced for the sake of making art, but often have a lot of money riding on their success—and are often created in coordination with the military itself—suggests that even if there is a good humanitarian message about wanting to end war because “war is hell” present in any given war film, those goals cannot be met by that film. That movie will make money because there is always someone willing to pay to see someone else blown up, and it makes money using money from an organization which the entire point of relies on the presumed eternal existence of conflict, thus reiterating the previous problems of the war narrative’s tendency towards exploitation of pain.

What constitutes a war narrative in the first place is up for conversation. If it is going to be gory and depict crimes or atrocities against humanity, then a line would need to be drawn between a war narrative and a crime narrative which may not exist in real life. Likewise, if the war narrative has to do with the romance between a Nazi officer and a French woman, as in a piece such as *Suite Francaise* (2014), whose entire story is based on that plot, there is probably a point where that is no longer necessarily a war narrative,

but rather a romance set against the backdrop of a war. And if a piece of media can take place during war without necessarily being a war narrative, it must also be possible for a piece of media to be a war narrative without taking place within a specific named conflict: the unconventional war narrative exists. Audiences can make the distinction too between heroic myths from the Classical tradition which may be echoed within American war cinema and the war narrative itself, so even just having some elements which have become associated with the war narrative does not necessarily make something a war narrative.

A war narrative is a war narrative because it looks and feels and reads like a war narrative, and the war narrative may even be a multi-genre work. It derives itself from the *Iliad* and will have more in common with that text than not. But if the *Iliad* is the parent text, it has split into branches. There is the existence of the *Iliad* as a narrative of the Trojan War: this is its primary function, and this is how it relates best to our own contemporary war narratives. The mythological elements of the epic are better fit, however, in the context of the contemporary megamythic superhero narrative, and because of this shared parentage, the war narrative and the superhero narrative find themselves overlapping more often than may be thought at first glance. There is dehumanizing which happens in both to different ends: Superheroes are like the gods; some, like Superman, come from above or beyond, to a place where normal man is incapable of reaching (and may fail as he tries, like Bellerophon), and others become elevated to the status of superhuman like Captain America and Captain Marvel. Wonder Woman's various origin stories tie her directly to the Classical tradition because of what she is, whether created from clay or earth, or a demigod as the daughter of Zeus. These

superhuman characters are rehumanized by the context of their fiction, in the same way the war narrative dehumanizes as well as humanizes its subjects; there exists a desire to recognize a monstrous/non-human nature in mankind at the same time there exists the need for man's *humanity* to be *the* driving force behind his actions. In the war narrative, this is expressed when the humanity of the soldier is embraced; in the superhero narrative, it is when Superman is Clark Kent.

Additionally, while the superhero narrative provides the kind of supernatural element which many traditional or realistic war narratives lack (which separates them from the gods and godlike heroes of the *Iliad*), they're similar enough in narrative trajectory and tropes that the language used to describe the superhero narrative (and, to an even better extent, the superhero movie) is easily translatable to being used to describe the war narrative. *The Avengers* (2012) is illustrative of this war movie pattern: a small group of Soldier-Defenders must combat an overwhelming army of Enemy-Other in order to save America (the implication being that, by extension, they are also saving the whole world). The Avengers are even assisted by a literal god (Thor) in their battle.

There is also the fact that war narratives and superhero movies exist within their real-world political contexts: Wonder Woman and Captain America fight Nazis when they're introduced. *The Avengers*, as it features the destruction of New York, is 9/11. While the realistic war narrative may find itself more immediately concerned with the emotional and physical trauma of actual war—two things which become by necessity versions of the same thing on screen because while we cannot hear the soldier's thoughts, we can certainly see the destruction of his body—this does not mean it is any more legitimately related to real events than fantasy war and war-adjacent narratives. As a

species, it seems that humans need to confront and process the trauma experienced on both the personal and cultural level. Similarly to how the *Legend of Zelda* provides cultural feedback on the constant (exhausting) battle against evil, a war-adjacent work like *Star Trek* does the same thing that superhero narratives do to de-escalate real trauma and fear into something manageable. The *Star Trek* episode “Balance of Terror” is just as much about the very real Cold War in which it was created as it is about an it is about the mysterious Romulans—with whom Earth engaged in atomic war. The nature of the science-fiction genre sometimes hides the fact that people *do* die in *Star Trek*, and they die frequently, usually as often a result of attack by Klingons, Romulans, and other Enemy-Others as by encountering strange diseases and parasites. That superhero narratives and war-adjacent works like *Star Trek* exist does not negate the continued cultural need and desire for the realistic war narrative, or revisionist war narrative either, which seeks repair the past cultural trauma. Fantasy and science fiction war narratives do not do the same work as a realistic war narrative because they readily admit to the fact that they are not relating an absolute truth in the same way filmmakers of realistic war narratives claim to be seeking it. Acknowledging that the *Iliad* is the parent of these works at the same time it is the parent of the war narrative gives permission to acknowledge the similarities between them. War manages to seep into virtually all of our blockbuster media, and the implication of this is that whatever happens to women in war narratives has a ripple effect across all of the related media.

The Soldier-Defender | Considerations of Gender, Hypermasculinity, and Removed Femininity in War Narratives

(The Odyssey; The Iliad; Saving Private Ryan; Fury; Band of Brothers; Troy; Mary Beard; Charlotte Lindsey; Maria Margaronis; Michael Walzer)

When Athena appears to Telemachus in *The Odyssey*, she does not appear as a woman but takes the appearance of Mentor. In *Women and Power*, Mary Beard makes the distinction that Athena exists as a cross between gender binaries—though a woman, she is decidedly not womanly. “In the Greek sense,” Beard states, “she is not a woman at all. For a start she’s dressed as a warrior, when fighting wars was exclusively male work...And she herself wasn’t even born of a mother but directly from the head of her father, Zeus. It was almost as if Athena, woman or not, offered a glimpse of an ideal male world in which women could not only be kept in their place but dispensed with entirely” (69-70). Beard points out a similar issue of non-femininity with the Amazons, and the careful removal of feminine identification among these ancient female warriors. When we look then at a text like the *Iliad*, it should be clear to recognize that in the context of stories about the Trojan War, women are not permitted warrior status—at least, not while still remaining women. This is one of the things that has been handed on to subsequent generations in the Western literary context of the war narrative. Within contemporary war narratives, women are still more often than not variations on Helen, the objective, the noncombatant.

Beyond the example of the non-feminine Athena and various other Classic “warrior women,” the point remains that war is coded as an explicitly masculine endeavour. It does not matter whether or not the fact is that women sometimes (often, now) fight, because the idea of a woman fighting and still being womanly is a subversion

of the culture of war. To return to the earlier assertion that women are not by nature the aggressive members of the species: it does not matter if it isn't true that women are not inherently unaggressive when the women being portrayed as aggressive are subversive by being so. Gender—especially a culture of hypermasculinity—affects the way in which audiences receive the war narrative. Men in the war narrative are capable of being both hero and villain, of being more accurately the Soldier-Defender of the narrative; and while men are allowed the duality of roles (Agamemnon is a great example of a villainous man in a war narrative), villainous attributes provide themselves to the more traditional expectations of the feminine. By default, women never are the Soldier-Defender.

For the villainous female to be true, there must also be the potential for the Enemy-Other of the war narrative to be necessarily neutered or demasculinized if not entirely feminized himself. Attitudes towards femininity in war narratives are dictated directly by attitudes towards masculinity, and particularly towards the masculinity of the heroes. If masculinity is the preferred binary of the war narrative, then femininity is the negative, and this relegates the war narratives' female characters, like Helen of Troy, to positions of unfavorability by both the narrative itself and its audience. Of course, in real life, it is undesirable to be a woman in a combat zone because of the particular risks that women specifically face which their male peers, combatant or civilian, do not (Lindsey), but a fictional, constructed text implying a wrongness about femininity's existence in contrast to the masculine ideal and the lack of strength on behalf of the feminine in a narrative is different from the conditions in which real women are put into positions of

danger because of the attitudes towards them. The textual wrongness of femininity amplifies a cultural interpretation of femininity in real life as wrongness.

When talking about soldiers and combatants, Michael Walzer generally talks about them in the plural; this negates the need to gender the individual soldier, though he does when he says that “For the state decrees that an army of a certain size be raised, and it sets out to find the necessary men, using all the techniques of coercion and persuasion at its disposal” (28), but it also iterates the fact that the soldier is just one of many people. The armies function as a unit, and in conversation about war, we’re still encouraged to think of the men who go to fight as part of that whole. This is not necessarily the case with the war narrative, which, in a particularly American way, places the emphasis on the heroic individual Soldier-Defender. While someone like Achilles is punished because he sits out from the fight on the basis of his insulted honor (Patroclus dying is a punishment for Achilles), that he is named and so are other men on both the sides of the Trojans and the Achaeans implies that knowing the individual in the war narrative is an important convention of the genre and has been since its conception. In shows such as *Band of Brothers* and movies such as *Fury* and *Saving Private Ryan*, the emphasis is placed on the behaviors and actions of a small, select few exceptional individuals. Their behaviors are not always noble; they cannot be, they are human, and then, of course, while audiences may sympathize with Achilles, they may also recognize that there are points where he is downright unlikable as a person. The audience is still expected to root for the heroes of the war narrative regardless of how they find their personalities. When the heroes appear at the end of the movie as members of a much smaller group of Soldier-Defenders (or even in the singular) against a much larger hoard of Enemy-Others, and

against what seem to be insurmountable odds (the Enemy-Other never stops coming), the impulse as an audience member is to root for them—audiences like to see the underdog win (even if the U.S. Army is really not an underdog and hasn't been since at least the mid-1800s). This speaks to an attitude about conflict in general; Walzer makes the argument that “there is, of course, a natural sympathy for the underdog in any competition, including war, and a hope that he can pull off an unexpected victory. But in the case of war, this is specifically a moral sympathy and a moral hope. It has to do with the perception that underdogs are also (usually) victims or potential victims: their struggle is right” (70). This is also relevant regarding America's conception of itself, too, and how it gets to be presented in media; Americans are always going to want to be the colonists fighting off the evil empire, because that's America's origin story—even if America itself has become an empire, too.

Women are generally denied entry into this kind of narrative, because women are generally not allowed to play the hero. This is regardless of genre, but is especially striking in the war narrative because of the way culture restricts women's access to being agents of violence rather than just victims of it. The cultural narrative says that women are not permitted to be anything but the direct object, the one who things are done to, not active participants themselves. Helen of Troy's cultural meaning is going to change when someone with a 21st-century American-centric lens reads her; but as she still appears in film and literature, and those works are still being read, it makes sense for the character to change, too. Likewise, the continued reading of the Classics and audiences' relationships with them is going to be defined as much by what those audiences bring to the table when encountering those texts as what the texts themselves say. Because violence and war is

coded as masculine, when female characters participate in the violence they become necessarily defeminized or degendered or masculinized themselves. As Helen is not an agent of violence (and is not permitted in her many narratives to be so), she remains resolutely feminine.

Another major consideration to make when it comes to gender, the Soldier-Defender, and Helen surrogates is that the war narrative itself is a fantasy, though many claim to use it to articulate truths about war. And while universal truths may be found in fantasy narratives, that does not negate the fact that this is what the war narrative is in the same way that the American western is also a fantasy. Maria Margaronis brings up in “The Anxiety of Authenticity” that there is a problem in the fantasy of historical novels regarding the responsibility of the writer to match the historical record. While Margaronis has the point that storytellers have a responsibility to their subject, she does not get into the place of divergence from historical fact within the novel and at what point the writer’s responsibilities to historical fact separates (if it does at all) from their responsibilities to telling a story. This point of divergence occurs during the war narrative with frequency; there is an urgency which exists in the war narrative to express the exact ways in which war is physically and mentally scarring, to chronicle the historicity of the injuring process, whether it happens to be men screaming in each others’ faces or practical effects on screen simulating gore. Margaronis comments that “to write a novel set in time of war or political brutality is necessarily to confront one’s own susceptibility to the allure of violence, as well as questions of authenticity, exploitation and responsibility” (138), which is true—to participate in the creation of a work set during war time or a war narrative itself is to task oneself to create a work that deals directly with violence. That

being said, however authentic the gore, or the setting, or even the people within the narrative may feel to the audience, the war narrative remains a fantasy. It requires its audience members to participate or imagine something they themselves may never experience—war as an event experienced personally is largely foreign to American audiences today in a way that it may not have been even forty years ago—but something which they also hear talked about mostly in abstractions, apart from its real-life ramifications and apart from factual people dying. The point then may not be authenticity to the historical fact as Margaronis argues, but rather that the aim may be, to use Sontag’s language, not to say that things happened exactly in this way but that “things like this happened.”

The war narrative is still a construction. Because it is a kind of fantasy in itself, the creator of that narrative controls exactly which stories are told and which stories are not, and while Margaronis speaks about a concern of authenticity on behalf of the female historical novel authors, that concern may not even exist when it comes to representations of women who do fight in wars, and women who are brutalized in war, and women whose existence during conflict has nothing to do with romantic relationships or their concern with whether or not men still find them attractive because those women’s primary concerns may actually be with staying alive, and that may not be something which serves the war narrative being told. Contemporary audiences sitting in a theater watching a war narrative play out on screen may even find themselves even further removed from the events within the narrative because, for one thing, it isn’t as though anybody alive today fought in the Trojan War, and for another, in the near future there will also be nobody alive who fought in WWII, either. While there may exist a much

more concrete historical record of the day-to-day existence within WWII, Americans already grapple with the mythologizing of that actual era—it is the Greatest Generation, coming from the devastation of the Great Depression and emerging into the resplendence of post-war American, when men were men and women were women. The attitude towards the era itself is idealized and has been since the 1980s, when across media there's a nostalgia looking back at those days prior to the Civil Rights movement. So even if men do truly horrible things within WWII narratives (as they do within Trojan War narratives), those men are still fighting a war which has a purpose, and one that America as a country tends to look back on as a necessity. Since this idealization of the past is the case in WWII narratives, it makes sense to conclude that the way women are depicted in them is going to be warped, too.

The Soldier-Defender's closest comparison point is the American Cinematic Cowboy who, like the Soldier-Defender, appears on film as a mythic figure. He is the construction of the masculine power fantasy of war, and when that fantasy is not being subverted, it is entirely inaccessible to women; it relies upon men being the heroes and conquerors against all odds. When women get to participate in those roles, it challenges the status quo which exists in the war narrative and threatens the supremacy of white masculinity at the top the narrative's structure. The roles which women must play in order to validate the heteromasculine ideal of the traditional war narrative then are ones of subservience: Helen receives the kindest treatment of all women in these fantasies, though Cassandra (especially with Margaronis's problem of authenticity in mind) is probably closer to the truth of what happens to women in conflict areas. Ultimately, however, Helen and Cassandra still fulfill the same role and are iterations of the same

woman. Usually, these women are objects; sexual availability (or withheld availability) is their most prominent character trait. Even historical war novels and narratives regarding the lives of women during war typically take the bent of the romantic narrative—these narratives are concerned primarily with the romantic and sexual lives of their female protagonists. Romance, of course, does not go away when war begins, but when women's roles are solely about their relationship and interactions with men, however authentic the historical facts of the narrative may appear, that becomes a kind of fantasy storytelling, too—one that continues to isolate war violence as a strictly masculine experience.

Reinterpretations of Classical Women in Conflict: Weapons of War, Violence against Women, and Women's Obligations to Recognize and Acknowledge the Suffering of Other Women

(Chi-Raq; the Iliad; the Odyssey; the Penelopiad; Sappho; Troy; Lysistrata; Beard; Sontag; Lindsey)

In Spike Lee's 2015 film *Chi-Raq*, the protagonist, Lysistrata, decides to do something to end gang violence (and gang culture) because she witnesses the pain of another woman whose child is killed during a drive-by shooting. The child was not the target, but a proximal casualty of the violence. On the one hand, it may be easy to disregard a movie about gang violence as being unrelated to war narratives, but on the other hand, gang violence is also probably the closest many Americans come to the kind of conflict that may be readily associated with other countries. The conversation about gun violence in America is also the conversation about gang violence, and about the unnecessarily loss of life by a weapon of war. *Chi-Raq*—the nickname referring specifically to the relationship noticed between the gang violence of Chicago and the war violence of Iraq—is a movie about warfare which has been scaled down to the level of gang violence and then expanded to back to the level of international conflict as the actions of the protagonists receive attention in-story by an international community of women. Based on Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, *Chi-Raq's* power comes from women who behave in solidarity above all else with each other: Lysistrata's realization that she must act comes from identification with the pain of another woman; by banding together and agreeing to withhold sex from their male partners until violence—at first in Chicago, and then the world—is ended, the women of Chicago are able to secure a future without the fear of children being killed by stray bullets. Their quest to end gang violence itself

becomes entrenched in military iconography, from the women's costuming to their seizure and barricading of an armory, posing the women themselves as a peaceful para-military force which manages to refrain from the physical violence associated with war in order to reach their own ends. *Lysistrata* finds her inspiration for the sex-strike she leads when she hears about (the real-life endeavors of) Leymah Gbowee's women's peace movement in Liberia, which itself was a response to what is regarded as warfare. The gang violence of *Chi-Raq* is treated by the narrative in the language of civil war, and one in which women are the only people capable of bringing about peace by using a weapon which is often held against them—their sexuality—and withholding it.

This is not a narrative unique to either *Chi-Raq* or its parent text, *Lysistrata*; frequently in real life, women are a major part of the peacemaking process despite the fact that women are very rarely the instigators of violence themselves (Lindsey). Women are expected to bring peace to the table.

Lysistrata's sex-strike is adopted not only by the girlfriends and wives of the gang members on both sides of the civil conflict, but around the world by other women demanding an end to violence by reciting the film's refrain of "No Peace / No Piece" in news broadcasts shown on televisions within the film's universe. The implication of other women joining the protests is that even if these international women do not face the same degree of violence in their own communities as the women of Chicago—or if the violence they do face is of a different scale and magnitude—there is at least a strong enough shared impulse among the women of rival gangs and the women of rival nations to recognize that violence as harmful on a global level, and to want to join in the fight against it with other women. There is also the implication that for the women who do

face violence in their own communities that there is more power in the numbers of women across the globe who want to challenge the systems of conflict, and that with that strength in numbers, there is the opportunity to succeed in eliminating violence. All of these women are acknowledging the use of sex as a weapon in and of itself, a means to an end. For them, the withholding of sex is the power they hold over men, and it is only the threat of continued withholding of sex which prompts men to think about what their participation and actions of violence has done to their communities and their friends and families before they can finally come together and sign a peace agreement. By withholding sex, Lysistrata and her peers are able to force the peace talks between gang members who previously couldn't even be in the same room as each other without threatening or committing gun violence.

There are of course a few problems with the narrative of *Chi-Raq*, even as a fantasy. One: *Chi-Raq* places the burden of solving violence on the shoulders of its female characters, implying that women are the only ones who can resolve violence at all despite the fact that women are not the ones who are doing the shooting. Women are given the responsibility of fixing what men have broken, and this is reflective of how women are treated in narratives as being like mothers to grown adult men. They are the providers and caretakers, and while they're not meant to participate in violence (though there are certainly female gang members), they are still expected to help the healing process after. Two: the world of *Chi-Raq*, however plagued it is by the war of gang violence, is still a heterosexual ideal—it is a fantasy in which women can subvert the threat of sexual violence in order gain power over men in a way that effectively ends war. It assumes that women even would want to have sex with men in the first place, thus

making their withholding of sex as much a difficulty for them to overcome as it is for the men to be challenged by, and it also assumes that women would entirely be on the same page when it comes to the right way to proceed, to end violence. It assumes too that all women are capable of fighting off whatever spousal or other source of sexual violence they may encounter by refusing sex, or that men are not going to resort to rape, even though even outside of conflict zones, women have been murdered for less.

Yet another assumption *Chi-Raq* makes is that all women have the same interests and motivations and would be able to and willing to put aside any differences they might have with each other for the greater good, and that there are some women who themselves do not benefit from the privileges afforded them by the permission they give to the continuance of sexual violence. There are, in fact, some women who do gain something by not challenging violence, particularly sexual violence, and who have a significant amount to lose if they should, regardless of whether or not (or in some cases particularly if they have) they themselves have been victims of that violence in the past. Women in the real world often do not speak up against violent acts committed by men not only because of the shame they may face from men for doing so, but also because of the condemnation they may face at the hands of other women, and this is a problem that happens in fictional narratives, too. Gbowee herself has mentioned of her actual sex-strike that the strike itself had “little or no practical effect, but was extremely valuable in getting us media attention.” Further, there’s the problem of the source material itself and what *Lysistrata* is: Mary Beard points out that “in the end, the fantasy of women’s power is firmly stamped down. In the final scene, the peace process consists of bringing a naked woman onto the stage...who is used as if she were a map of Greece, and is metaphorically

carved up in an uncomfortably pornographic way between the men of Athens and Sparta” (68). For its part, *Chi-Raq*’s resolution begins when Lysistrata and her boyfriend, gang leader Demetrius, challenge each other to a sex-off, in which the first participant to climax loses. It is a televised event, with people watching all over the world to see who will be victorious. The only reason it does not reach a conclusion is because Cyclops, the rival gang leader, interrupts it, having during the sex-strike come to acknowledge the pain caused by gang violence which he has been complicit in. The point remains however that the act of sex itself is treated like a battle between Lysistrata and Demetrius.

Rape is, as previously discussed, still being used as a weapon of war wherever there is war at all. Maybe in great enough numbers like what is implied to be happening in the context of *Chi-Raq*, sex-strikes could be equal enough tools as mutually-assured destruction to force the hands of diplomacy into peace: Gbowee’s sex-strike isn’t the only one to have occurred in recent memory to encourage political activism and to demand ceasefires in places of war. The problem with the idea of sex-strikes, however, as the only method in which peace is sought, is that without the acknowledgment that women are more than what they can or choose not to provide to men in terms of how their bodies are used or abused, the sex-strike can only go so far. It is not enough on its own to convince men any more of a woman’s personhood, or her right not to be a victim of violence. It is still something, especially in a film like *Chi-Raq*, which is couched in the nature of sexual availability being the ultimate requirement of women, particularly where there is violence around them. That being said, rape still happens even in places where there is not active warfare or even particularly active gang violence or other conflict; rape happens on college campuses, in American suburbs, in hospitals, in jails, in schools, and

in government buildings, just to name a few locations of trauma. It is a weapon of war, but like guns, it is also just a weapon in general. Its purposes may see some variation, but ultimately rape and sexual violence is always about power over the victim. Threats of rape remain silencing tactics in a way which is totally absent from *Chi-Raq*—but does, as we'll see, emerge in the *Iliad*.

Unlike the trauma of having one's home destroyed or their family murdered, it is entirely possible for a woman growing up in mainstream America to have experienced the shared trauma of rape as a woman in Bosnia—and this is a connection to violence which *Chi-Raq* links between women. But while the women in *Chi-Raq* all react to violence, here is another divergence in authenticity of the representation of women's experiences: the shared unity among those women is the outrage over the murder of children, as described in their protest signs, and it's outrage channeled through the lens of being caretakers themselves, as all of the women in *Chi-Raq* are maternal or have maternal qualities. It is not the reaction to violence against themselves which unifies them, but violence against other bodies. If war is one of the eternal narratives of the human experience, however, one which is transcendent beyond time and place, then so is rape. A woman in America is far more likely to be sexually assaulted than to be forced into a combat zone and made to decide whether or not to shoot another human being—and even if she does find herself in that position, women are raped in the military, too. The uniform of combat does not protect them from sexual assault. Based on what women's position in the context of western culture has been since the Classical era, this is something that contemporary American woman shares in common with women all those thousands of years ago, too. Interestingly, horrifyingly, unlike most violence associated

with war—murder, torture, the use of poison—rape is the one violent act outside of conflict zones which becomes the responsibility of the victim to avoid rather than the rapist not to commit. Nobody questions whether or not a person was stabbed, but they do question whether or not rape victims are actually raped. There is less debate about whether a person deserves to be robbed for flaunting their wealth than whether or not a woman deserves to be raped for dressing in a particular manner. Rape as a weapon is even, it seems, only condemned in the context of war, though as Lindsey notes, the rules governing sexual violence in combat are murky in the Geneva Convention, as though there's a refusal to admit these things happen at all despite overwhelming evidence and accounts from survivors that they do. And if the point of depictions of gruesome subjects is not to say that things happened exactly like this, but things like this happen and continue to happen, then what is too gruesome to be included is also just as important.

Chi-Raq is a contemporary reading and retelling of *Lysistrata*; likewise, Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* (2004), despite retaining a Classical setting, is a contemporary reinterpretation of the *Iliad* and the Trojan War myths—ones which directly blame Helen for the war. If the war is being blamed on Helen, whether in the parent text or in an adaptation of it, then what happens to the other women as a result of the Trojan War as described in texts like *The Trojan Women* and *Agamemnon*, then Helen is responsible—directly or indirectly—for the suffering of a lot of other women. Judgment then gets cast on Helen by the narrative voice.

Between various translations of the *Iliad* and representations of the Trojan War and its characters across different classical and contemporary media, there's a problem with Helen and how she should be or is represented in those renditions. The challenge of

Helen as compared to a character like Lysistrata (who is blameless for the death of the child and the pain of her mother), or even another woman in the *Iliad* like Briseis is this: there is enough room for interpretation as to whether she willingly went to Troy with Paris or if she was captured (abducted) and, depending on the narrative's position, Helen's attitude towards Paris, Menelaus, and the other Trojans and Achaeans becomes problematized. The position that Helen is entirely to blame for the Trojan War can be defended, but considering the ekphrasis of the shield of Achilles in book XVII, describing the cycle of humanity, it's just as valid an argument to make that man will always find a reason to go to war—at least, the history of the *Iliad* suggests this, and Helen is just someone on whom to place blame for a seemingly unending war. Helen's position in a narrative comes down to whether or not she was coerced into going to Troy; though she is not technically a spoil of war in the same way so many of the Trojan women become spoils, and then are transformed into war brides or concubines, Helen's trajectory inverts that transformation from spoil to bride by becoming a bride who turns into the ultimate spoil of the war. Retrieving Helen is the primary objective of the war in Trojan War narratives. Helen herself is a gift from Aphrodite to Paris in exchange for being declared the most beautiful of the goddesses—so while this is not as a war-related spoil, Helen is still an object to be given (by another woman, no less)—and then she becomes that ultimate war spoil because whoever wins the Trojan War gets Helen as the prize. And while being described as the most beautiful woman is an idealization, it is still an inherently dehumanizing act to place a woman on a pedestal. It is also an act done to Helen rather than one that she herself performs—something which is done from without rather than within. When Helen is an object who has no agency, as she often appears to

be, she herself cannot be the agent who starts the war, even with that cliché statement that she's "The Face Who Launched a Thousand Ships." By following Walzer's assertion that wars are started by people, Helen didn't launch the ships, Agamemnon and Menelaus did, and therefore, Agamemnon and Menelaus are the ones who started the war.

Regardless of Helen's involvement with "causing" the Trojan War, there may still exist an obligation on her behalf, in the same way that Lysistrata feels a moral responsibility for, the other women who become involved in the conflict and are taken as slaves, the other women who are injured as a direct result of the war. Perhaps, if Helen were a real person, she may have a responsibility to feel sympathy for, for example, Ajax's wife, who is at the end of the Trojan War in a position not too dissimilar to the woman whose child is killed by gang violence; if Helen were an actual person, or a representation of an actual person (which, to be fair, is not necessarily how Homer's *Iliad* works, though in theory it *is* how *Troy* functions), then she might too feel an obligation to be sympathetic to Cassandra. By extension, then, Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra would have the same obligation to feel for Cassandra, though perhaps her rage at both her husband and the girl he brings back as a spoil of war is warranted.

Helen is not, however, even entirely human in the context of the *Iliad*, and in this regard is separated from other women not only by her social class and her beauty, but her own parentage. Her father is Zeus, her brothers Castor and Pollux who, in addition to making an appearance in the Trojan War, become the constellation Gemini.

There are at least two ways to read the presence of the gods in the *Iliad*: they can be there, literally, participatory in the bloodshed and violence that does mean that Apollo really does have to be the one to come in and physically remove Patroclus's armor in

order to allow Hector the opportunity to injure and kill him; or, they aren't, and the presence of the gods is figurative. Or perhaps they're both. Achilles's mother maybe doesn't go directly to Zeus to prostrate herself before him, but prays hard enough that she might as well have been in front of the god himself. If the gods are figurative, as they appear to be in Petersen's *Troy*, then in the case of Helen, Aphrodite's presence is just the embodied faculty of her lust. She goes out of her own brain, forgets her daughter and husband—or rather, rejects them both—because she is so attracted to Paris that she just stops caring about her family, or is no longer able to pretend that she cares about them at all. This feels like an extremely cruel Helen, and in the case of a contemporary adaptation of the *Iliad*, could make Helen a particularly unattractive character, though, when she's still supposed to be coveted by the audience as much as the men around her. To get around the problem of having a woman cheating on her husband and not make her the villain, Petersen makes the choice to create a Menelaus who is as unattractive and greedy as Agamemnon so that Helen has a reason to cheat on him, and Hermione is absent altogether. There is no golden apple and no presence of the gods aside from a moment between Achilles and Thetis, his mother, who prophesizes his death. This is also the attitude which a speaker in a fragment from Sappho takes towards the situation:

“When Helen saw the most beautiful of mortals, she chose for
the best that one, the destroyer of all the house of Troy, and
thought much of children or dear parent, but was led astray by
love to bestow her heart far off, for woman is ever easy to lead
astray when she thinks of no account what is near and dear”
(transl. Cox).

“For she who overcame everyone
in beauty (Helen)
Left her fine husband
Behind and went sailing to Troy.

Not for her children nor her dear parents
 had she a thought, no—
]led her astray

]for
]lightly
]reminded me now of Anaktoria
 who is gone” (transl. Carson).

If the women of *Chi-Raq* are able to join together out of concern for the children and elders of their community, then that’s something that Helen is often shown as being incapable of doing. She is frequently positioned as a selfish character—which is fine, except that her selfishness is somehow less warranted than the selfishness of a character like, for instance, Achilles, who has been denied his spoils of war. At the core of Helen’s characterizations, there remains the fact that she is motivated by love or (more likely) lust. It is not a personification or goddess of love who leads Helen (as, Sappho’s speaker suggests, all women) astray, but love—or sexual drive—itself.

At some point, Paris’s physical attractiveness stops being enough for Helen to remain within her fugue state, as she seems at times to operate within—if she was ever genuinely attracted to Paris in the first place, which while not as easily debated within the context of *Troy*, which posits Orlando Bloom’s Paris against Brendan Gleeson’s Menelaus, is certainly up for contention within the context of different translations of the *Iliad*. Book III features a duel between Paris and Menelaus, from which Paris is saved by Aphrodite. After depositing Paris in his bedroom, Aphrodite goes to Helen to encourage her to Paris’s side. Helen rejects her, saying,

“But why now?—
 because Menelaus has beaten your handsome Paris
 and hateful as I am, he longs to take me home?
 Is that why you beckon here beside me now

with all the immortal cunning in your heart?
Well, go to him yourself—*you* hover beside him!” (Fagles, III.466-71)

The same moment occurs in Caroline Alexander’s translation, starting with Aphrodite’s address to Helen in line 390:

“‘Come here; Alexandros summons you home;
he is there, in his bedroom, on his bed that is inlaid with rings,
shining in beauty and raiment—you would not think
that he came from fighting a man, but rather that he was going
to a dance, or had just left the dance and was reclining.’
So she spoke; and stirred the anger in Helen’s breast.
And when she recognized the goddess’ beautiful cheeks
and ravishing breasts and gleaming eyes,
she stood amazed, and spoke out and addressed her by name:
‘Mad one; why do you so desire to seduce me this way?
Will you drive me to some further place among well-settled cities,
to Phrygia or lovely Maeonia?
Perhaps there too is some mortal man beloved by you—
since now Menelaos has vanquished godlike Alexandros
and desires that I, loathsome as I am, be taken home.
Is it for this reason you stand here now conniving?
Go, sit yourself beside him, renounce the haunts of the gods,
never turn your feet to Olympus,
but suffer for him and tend him forever,
until he makes you either his wife, or his girl slave.
As for me, I will not go there—it would be shameful—
to share the bed of that man. The Trojan women
will all blame me afterward; the sufferings I have in my heart art
without end” (III.390-412)

In both translations, Helen rejects Aphrodite and her urging of Helen to go to Paris’s side; Fagles’s translation is much briefer, and, with its emphasized “*you*” to Aphrodite and its exclamation mark reads quick and powerfully, the burst of anger that Helen has towards Aphrodite. Alexander’s is longer, but allows Helen to speak more, and to take Aphrodite to task: here, Helen is aware of the fact that the other women are just as likely to blame her for their suffering as the men fighting are, and she appears to be more concerned with that, more aware that her actions have meaning. The comparison point between the two

starts with the line of Alexander's which begins, "Is it for this reason..." though even without the above language discussing how Menelaus has defeated Paris, there's more to be wrought from the lengthier verse. Helen makes the comparison between herself and Aphrodite, and in doing so explains exactly where she sees herself: aware of the fact that she may herself become as much as slave as any of the other spoils of war, aware of the fact that she may never get to see her homeland again, Sparta being to Helen what Olympus is to Aphrodite, and then humbled into caring for a man who doesn't deserve the attention, who is as unworthy of her as any mortal would be of Aphrodite. To say that Helen is unhappy is an understatement.

Aphrodite doesn't take Helen's response well, and threatens her:

"in my immortal rage I may just toss you over" (Fagles),

"Do not provoke me, wicked girl, lest I drop you in anger,
and hate you as much as I now terribly love you,
and devise painful hostilities, and you are caught in the middle of both,
Trojans and Danaans, and are destroyed by and evil fate" (Alexander).

With Aphrodite's threat, Helen has no choice but to go to Paris anyway, and sit in a chair which Aphrodite herself places face-to-face with him. In a reading which supposes that the gods are literal, then Aphrodite is an example of the kind of women who benefit from women bending to men's interests; her responsibility is not to other women, but to a mortal man who called her the most beautiful. When Aphrodite has no obligation to care for Helen's safety, then there is no reason to assume that Helen should feel any obligation to care for other women, or that she must act in self-preservation against what she knows will cause hurt to other women. Further, if Helen goes to Paris not because she loves him, or is even particularly attracted to him anymore but rather because she's being threatened with injury and pain from a higher power which she has no agency against, then that's an

act of coercion. A “yes” which is manipulated and coerced under fear of harm isn’t actual consent, and as Helen even expresses in both translations that at this point, she prefers Menelaus over Paris, that throws further doubt into whether or not Helen’s behavior in scenes in which she appears with Paris are expressions of her own agency. Unlike the women in *Chi-Raq*, Helen is someone who would be entirely unable to commit to a sex-strike because sex itself is something she has absolutely no control over in the first place. No solidarity exists between women in this Classical text, though Alexander’s Aphrodite tells Helen that she does love her.

Another implication happening in this scene is that women prefer the men who win battles; Menelaus is someone favored by Ares, the god of war, and is coded as explicitly more masculine in this regard than someone like Paris, who is championed by Aphrodite. Interestingly, Menelaus doesn’t win the battle with Paris in *Troy*, but since *Troy* doesn’t have this particular divine dimension, and since Helen still favors Paris in *Troy*, that fact serves to reinforce the alpha-hindbrain idea that it’s through defeating someone in combat that makes men more attractive to women. Helen has no interest in the *Iliad* in the end of the fight because people are dying—this is distressing to her. What does matter is that the text itself places a preference on the kind of man whose violent masculinity is capable of winning battles—the kind of man who is able to kill his enemies and is more specifically more physically powerful than the man who stole his wife. Menelaus is, in the text, a more attractive man than Paris because he doesn’t need to be whisked away from battle. The individual battles which get described about the men who have an interest in Helen are examples of peacocking: whoever is the strongest is most deserving of the trophy woman. This moment where Menelaus is not, in the Fagles

translation, even his finest hour, though—that title belongs to Book XVII, where Menelaus protects Patroclus's body and Achilles's armor.

In contrast to someone like Helen, there's Penelope. In Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, there's the distinct sense that the chorus of maids who are slain by Telemachus under Odysseus's orders deserved and continue to deserve better. The *Penelopiad* is not a war narrative; the war is long over by the time Penelope and the maids finally get to tell their story, and even in the case of the *Odyssey*, the focus is less on what war does to a man but more on what it takes to get home after the battle is over. It is relevant as a war-adjacent text not only because of its relationship with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but because it brings up the same questions of solidarity between women that movie like *Chi-Raq* asks: to what extent are women supposed to support each other? In the *Iliad*, they frankly are incapable of doing so; Aphrodite has vastly different motivations from Helen, who even when she is aware of the suffering of other women (and her own suffering) must operate in terms of self-preservation, and there simply aren't very many female characters who exist outside of their relationships to the men in their lives. In the ideal world, women should support each other; in solidarity with other women, there is the means to end widespread violence. Without that solidarity, women die. Penelope's suitors are not soldiers, but they're still capable of committing the same level of sexual violence against the maids (and Penelope, if she isn't careful) that the soldiers in the Trojan War are. They're still capable of committing rape.

So the conversation about women in war narratives and war-adjacent narratives includes by necessity a discussion about rape and sexual assault. Again, this is not to suggest that men are never raped, but to acknowledge that women are disproportionately

affected by rape as a weapon of war (Lindsey). And as a weapon of war, it is planned, organized, as a way to continue the task of destruction which war is, to eliminate populations and to terrorize. When the Achaean soldiers are conquering Troy and selecting which women are theirs to bring back, it is not only a way of getting their spoils (women remaining objects of conquest), but it's also a way to ensure the absolute end of Troy. Excepting the few Trojans who are able to escape and then create Rome in Virgil's *Aeneid*, the Trojan people themselves are gone.

While Penelope might not particularly like her maids (having been insulted by maids even as a young girl), that doesn't necessarily mean that they deserve to be killed—and yet, Penelope must act on a self-preservation instinct too, unable to speak out against what Odysseus orders because he is not the same man returning from war as who he was when he left. She does not know him anymore. Likewise, it probably isn't fair for Helen to get to go back to her life as the Queen of Sparta after the Trojan War has concluded while the Trojan women are put into slavery and worse, but there isn't a whole lot that Helen can actually do about that, not in the context of her text. All things considered, regardless of who wins the Trojan War, Helen's situation is more or less unchanged: she is still the queen (of somewhere), and is still in a position of privilege over every other woman in her world. Helen doesn't have to care that other women are being injured as a result of a war which men blame as being her fault; she is still going to be wealthy and beautiful either way (even if Alexander's translation suggests a nuance to her understanding of just how tenuous that privilege is). Her concerns are not those of someone like Lysistrata; Helen doesn't feel the need to take direct action against violence, and largely is incapable of doing so, anyway.

She seems happy enough when she reappears in the *Odyssey* at Menelaus's side. It may bear mentioning that Helen had been kidnapped before, prior to her marriage, and had been returned by her brothers: the act of being taken away by men is somewhat a normal situation for someone like Helen, even if the time frame of the abduction changes. Men dictate where it is that Helen goes; even in *Troy*, she is hurried away by Paris and needs his help to get away from Menelaus and Agamemnon. The movement of women in the war narrative in general is largely determined by men: men tell them to evacuate or to stay in place, men take them from their homes, and so on. Men have weapons which (because men restrict the access to them) women do not have, and therefore are able to control those movements more rigidly.

Despite the length of the Trojan War, when Helen reflects back on what happened to her during it in the *Odyssey*, she tells Telemachus that she “grieved too late for the madness / Aphrodite sent me” (Fagles, IV.290-5), that she “wished Aphrodite had not made me / go crazy” (Wilson, IV.260-5). That madness is also echoed in the epithet which Alexander's Helen gives to Aphrodite—“Mad one,” she calls her. The episode which brought Helen to Troy in the first place is regarded as a kind of madness, and therefore out of her control. She forgets her daughter and her “fine, handsome, clever husband” (Wilson). Even in the midst of war Helen finds Menelaus (war-driven, the favorite of Ares) preferable to Paris, and then continues to find him attractive (or at least feels the need to articulate so) afterwards. While this could present a potential issue for contemporary adaptations, it tends not to be the angle works like *Troy* take. Helen makes the decision to go with Paris in *Troy* and appears to have the agency to do so, though

perhaps this too is self-preservation against the actions of *Troy's* boorish iteration of Menelaus.

Troy also doesn't have to deal with the potential consequences of what happens to Helen if she does find Menelaus unattractive and is still returned to him. For one thing, he's dead. But when women are taken as wives after war, or returned to bad husbands afterward, that keeps them in a vulnerable position stripped of agency. Upon Telemachus's visit to Sparta, Helen does not seem to be in any particularly vulnerable space. Helen carries on as a queen after the Trojan War is over, after other women have been brutalized and made to witness the death of their husbands and children. Penelope, likewise, goes on with life after her maids are killed. Sometimes there is too much risk to the life some women lead for them to actually say anything against masculine violence. In *Chi-Raq*, women's solidarity with each other is the method which disrupts the violence of a patriarchy set on destruction. Sometimes, women themselves are complicit in the violence of the systems of war, like Aphrodite is. The world is still such that, despite rape being considered a crime against humanity, a rapist can still get away with fewer than two years in prison once convicted of the crime, adding another dimension to why it may be unfeasible or difficult for women to work against sexual violence.

Yet, given the content of her conversations with Aphrodite and her multiple rejections of Paris at different points in the *Iliad*, there is room to interpret Helen as a victim, too. When that is the case, it may be more forgivable that she seems less sympathetic to the plights of the Trojan women like Hecuba and Andromache because she too, as Alexander's translation suggests, is already suffering herself. Scarry has already pointed out that there is a kind of impossibility which exists when it comes to

understanding the extent of the pain of others, and Sontag too addresses the fact that there is no way to universalize suffering; if Helen is suffering in her own way, then it is possible that she is too preoccupied in the injuring of her own world to be able to even comprehend to a significant degree what is going on in the injuring of the world of others. The *Iliad* also starts towards the end of the Trojan War; while *Troy* and some other recent adaptations of the Trojan War story have given us an idealized version of Helen and Paris's relationship, it's important to remember that she's still being treated by him, and by all of the other men, as an object. For any apparent power which Helen has as a queen, that power is negated by the fact that she might as well be imprisoned in Troy after getting there, since she does not have the ability to leave on her own—Paris had to bring her to Troy, and another man would have to bring her out of Troy.

Given this reading, it is possible to feel sympathy for Helen, too. Characters who fulfil the Helen-archetypal role in a war narrative are ones who have little if any power and agency, and they are just as often the ghosts of the narrative, or objects coveted by the male soldiers. They are just as capable of being violated (or killed) as the Cassandras and the Briseises. While Helen's status as a beautiful woman offers her some level of protection in the context of the *Iliad*—Menelaus wants his wife back and therefore is not going to let someone kill her, or kill her himself—the other beautiful women of the war narrative very rarely have that same degree of protection.

Spectral Womanhood in World War II Narratives

(*Gail Simone*; *Kelly Sue DeConnick*; *Margaronis Suite Francaise*; *The Innocents*; *Fury*; *Band of Brothers*; “*Bastogne*”; *Saving Private Ryan*)

Unlike in media such as *Chi-Raq* and the *Penelopiad*, the majority of WWII narratives are unconcerned with women’s relationships with violence—whether as victim, participant, or both. WWII narratives are often split based on the gender of focal characters, in which the gender determines, for the large part, whether or not the narrative is going to be a war narrative or a romance with a backdrop of war as its setting. Movies such as *Suite Francaise* (2011) are concerned with interpersonal relationships, even though in this case its historical backdrop is the Nazi-occupation of France; while sexual violence appears within the movie, it is not something that happens with regard to the romance-plot of the main character. Movies like *The Innocents* (2016), which depicts the aftermath of the presence of Soviet soldiers and the rape they committed in Poland, are not the norm but rather an exception. And while those narratives—ones that talk about what happens after the war, and what in particular happens to women after the war—do have a lineage tracing back to plays such as *The Trojan Women*, that is not necessarily the parent text being adapted regularly, and even that looks back to the events which are described in the *Iliad*.

On the other hand, when men are the focalization of the narrative, the impulse seems to be an immediate appeal to the violence, a desire to show on screen the act of injuring implicit in warfare. However humanizing the narratives may be of the Soldier-Defender, there is still the fact that everybody else is often dehumanized, peripheral, made unreal as soldiers themselves become re-rendered. This is a problem which exists

across genres, in which the only characters who become fleshed out are the men; women are often two-dimensional at best, especially in film but in literature, too, and their appearances in media—action media in particular, like the war narrative and superhero film—serves often the singular purpose of retraumatizing the hero of the piece and thus giving him further depth.

As previously discussed, a relationship exists between the superhero narrative and the war narrative. While there is a divide between the “magic” elements and the “real” which does not exist in the *Iliad* but does between war narratives and superhero narratives, they’re still ultimately interested in the many of the same story themes exploring heroic achievement and human suffering, and as such what is said about women in one of those genres may also be said about women in the other. In the late 1990s, Gail Simone (who would later go on to write the comic book series *Birds of Prey*) compiled a list of the deaths of female characters in comic books under the title “Women in Refrigerators,” which was then posted as a website under the same name. In her introduction to the website, Simone says:

“This is a list I made when it occurred to me that it’s not that healthy to be a female character in comics. I’m curious to find out if this list seems somewhat disproportionate, and if so, what it means, really.

These are superheroines who have been either depowered, raped, or cut up and stuck in the refrigerator. I know I missed a bunch. Some have been revived, even improved—although the questions remains as to why they were thrown in the wood chipper in the first place.”

It is in “Women in Refrigerators” that Simone popularizes the term “fridging” to pointedly refer to the act of killing women as a plot device to further the story of the male characters, and to more broadly refer to that instance of superheroines being “depowered,

raped, or cut up.” Originally, it was used in reference to the girlfriend of Green Lantern Kyle Rayner being literally dismembered and put into a fridge with, it would appear, the sole purpose of providing plot-trauma for Kyle; the term has stuck around in the comic book community since. Simone put together the list because this kind of thing happens with surprising and alarming frequency in the world of comics—she says, “When I realized that it was actually harder to list major female heroes who HADN’T been sliced up somehow, I felt that I might be onto something a bit ... well, creepy,” and while Simone’s tone throughout the website is one of tongue-in-cheek snarkiness while she broaches the subject of how women get treated and represented in comic books, the point remains that it is actually a significant point that she’s making about that representation. Simone is fair; she has a section on the site dedicated to the responses from other comic book writers and artists, and maintained the website despite actual threats of injury from so-called comic book fans. (Simone still receives that kind of criticism from fans who don’t even recognize her as one of the major *Batman* writers and consultants over the past two decades, as she did in March 2019 after criticizing director Zack Snyder’s approach to the character.)

Similarly to the state of women in comic books, it’s also extremely dangerous to be a woman in a war narrative. Simone puts the problem into context by pointing out that while men in superhero comics are getting injured and traumatized, too, the amount of them in the narrative framework who exist in general is so overpowering to the number of female characters that it’s not as though men being traumatized or murdered is the only thing that happens to them in superhero comics; likewise, because women are so few in war narratives, the fact that the majority (if not all of them) end up maimed or

otherwise violated is overwhelming. To that end, Simone's identification of "fridging" as a narrative action against female characters offers a way to talk about women who are introduced into the war narrative in service of the development of the male heroes, without the opportunity to develop themselves. Because the narrative is more concerned with the problem of male pain and suffering—which is often something brought on by their own actions—when women suffer, audiences don't get to hear their cries of pain. Audiences do not witness their brutalization as a thing which is terrible in and of itself because it's another human being being injured, but as a thing which is terrible because it exists and hurts male characters. The male reaction to the pain of women—and their subsequent pain from witnessing it—is the focus, not the pain of the women themselves. The female character is still an object—sometimes a treasured object, even, but an object nonetheless—and this is one of the ways that comic book women are akin to Helen, and akin to the women of all war narratives.

Further, Simone offers a few possible motivations or reasons behind the trend of fridging women: she points out that (at least in 1999, when the website was made), none of the male comic book writers she spoke to had any idea what the actual percentage of women reading comics was, then follows with "it's possible that less thought might be given to the impact the death of a female character might on the readership," implying that part of the hesitation to kill male characters has to do with a feared decline in readership for doing so. "Or," she continues, "it's possible that there's rarely a fan outcry when a female is killed....Or maybe many of the male creators simply relate less to female characters. Or maybe it's a combination of these." It may seem as though Simone is giving a pass to male comic book writers (and, by extension, to male storytellers in

general) for not being able to relate to their female characters and therefore not being able to write them well, but this has been an articulated problem since the advent of feminist criticism in the 1960s, in which male writers can't write women characters because they've never had to think about the world from the perspective of a woman, while women have to navigate a world designed with a androcentric-bias from the moment they're born and to the moment they die. Because men are simply not encouraged—or rather, challenged—frequently enough to look at the world from a perspective outside of themselves, it makes perfect sense that their understanding of the pain of others, and particularly the pain of women, is filtered through their understanding of how women's pain hurts them, and not how women's pain hurts women as other human beings.

While there may be an argument that, as these narratives are all more or less fictional, so the violence within something like a comic book or a war film is something that has no relationship to the real world and is an escapism (these are, of course, still fantasies), saying so ignores the fact that the fantasy is influenced by reality, and that women are often the victims of violence across the board, and often have their bodies violated and mutilated by men. Sometimes, fiction *does* reaffirm the problems of the real world, and in fact, magnifies them to the extent where if a man is having fantasies about hurting women, there is a very real chance that he might hurt actual women, too. Further, in these narratives, the pain of women exists (as she does herself) in relation to man. If he were not there, there would be no reason to relate the pain at all. The women exist within the context of male fantasies of violence, power, and emotional suppression. To say that it doesn't matter that they're fictional negates the fact that fantasy is often preferred over reality, and that these fantasy situations are in some way desirable.

In the case of David Ayer's 2014 WWII movie *Fury*, the female citizen Emma's death is an example of fridging in the context of a war narrative. When she and her sister are introduced, there is a language barrier(?) between them, Don (Brad Pitt), and Norman (Logan Lerman). The audience is provided a scene which imitates the domestic, a reality which Ayer suggests is no longer accessible in the context of war. Don insists that the women make breakfast for all four of them, and then provides the opportunity for Emma and Norman to have privacy in Emma's room—another thing that doesn't exist for characters like Emma and her sister, whose home is in constant danger of being shelled out and then invaded by soldiers (Axis or Allied), and doesn't exist for Don and Norman, either, whose day-to-day activities involve being inside a tank with the other members of their crew.

Emma's existence is framed in relation to Norman. She's the first person he's met around his own age since he's become a member of the tank crew, and is also the first person not to immediately barrage him with verbal or physical assaults. Aside from the language barrier—without knowing German that well, it's impossible for the men to(?) understand exactly what it is she's saying, and likewise Emma isn't shown to have a strong grasp on English—Emma is the first person Norman is able to make an emotional connection to. It isn't clear what his age is in the film, simply that he's significantly younger than the other men in the crew, and that his naivety is something he still hasn't managed to grow out of, but this moment feels like Ayer setting Emma up to be Norman's first love. He doesn't have a girlfriend or a wife back home that he talks about with the other crew members, who do have photos of their loved ones (and the photo of the wife of the guy who Norman is replacing). As the breakfast is an imitation of the

domestic, this moment between Norman and Emma is an imitation of teenagers falling in love, a point which is accentuated by Norman's palm reading for Emma. It's a trick that he learned from his grandmother, and when he reads Emma's palm, he tells her that she'll have one great love in her life—presumably, him. Things almost feel normal.

The other members of the tank crew find Don and Norman (and by consequence, Emma and her sister), and they effectively break the domestic, ruining the moment. They belittle both women, manhandling them, before moving on to emasculate Norman. The atmosphere is somehow worse than what it was when Don was forcing the sisters to make breakfast, as the other crew members make a mess of the meal, chewing with their mouths open and providing a threat of violence with the presence which Don can just barely keep from boiling over. Finally, the tank crew has to leave the apartment.

When they return later, the building has been destroyed by shelling or bombing (it isn't clear which, ultimately doesn't matter to the narrative), and Emma is dead. The trauma of her death is not framed as the fact that during war, innocent people are killed, nor is it that a girl who had to suffer humiliation cast on her by much older male soldiers and that that's the last thing the audience gets to see of her alive before she dies not long after their exit—it is that she, a girl who Norman was attracted to, is gone, and therefore no longer available to him. We can only understand Emma in the capacity that Norman understands her, and in that capacity she is an object to be won over with charming stories about his fortune telling grandmother (who is probably also dead).

Obviously, *Fury* wouldn't be able to pass the Bechdel test, a contemporary standard in whether or not films can meet the bare minimum of allowing two female characters to interact without having to mention a male character. The only women the

audience is permitted to view in *Fury* include a few Army Nurses in the background of the first scene, after the tank crew has come back from another traumatizing mission in which one of their ranks was killed, a photograph of the man's wife, and then Emma and her sister; there's no room in *Fury* for women to look at each other without men being involved, never mind talk to each other. There's another "does this piece of media meet the bare minimum of representation of women" standard which Kelly Sue DeConnick, one of the most recent writers of the *Captain Marvel* comic books, calls her "Sexy Lamp Test." During an interview with *Comics Alliance* to promote the then-new *Captain Marvel* on-going title, DeConnick said, "Nevermind the Bechdel test, try this: if you can replace your female character with a sexy lamp and the story still basically works, maybe you need another draft. They have to be protagonists, not devices." In this way, Ayer's use of a character like Emma fails the Sexy Lamp Test. The audience isn't told or shown anything about her except that Don thinks Norman should try his luck with her, and the audience doesn't know what she's like when she's not functioning under the impression that she could be killed at any moment by these American soldiers—and that she's scared out of her mind when the more brutish of them (including Jon Bernthal's horrifying Grady "Coon-Ass" Travis) come bursting into the room. And, while wanting to respect the audience, in general men watching a movie like *Fury* during that particular scene might have no sensitivity to what the arrival of the rest of the tank crew could inspire in terms of anxiety in a young woman, and likewise it is difficult to imagine that the director had much sympathy or sensitivity towards the female character, either.

That moment—the interruption of bonding between Norman and Emma—is terrifying through the female gaze in a way that would be much different than the terror

which Norman would be feeling; he's used to being harassed and humiliated by these men, but the bodily fear he anticipates is somewhat mitigated by his awareness of how far they go. It is different from the anticipation which Emma would feel and there is no comparison. Norman's terror is that of the anticipation of continued hazing, rather than the very real threat of sexual violence which women in conflict zones (women outside of conflict zones, too), experience. All the audience knows of Emma, at that point, is that aside from the short moment she and Norman share bonding like regular teenagers, her existence is one of fear, followed very quickly by death.

Because Emma's experience is filtered through a male gaze, and because the narrative of *Fury* frames the ultimate tragedy about Emma's death as not being that she died but rather was unable to exist for a long enough amount of time for Norman to consummate their romantic bond, it's hard to call this a sympathetic portrayal of women in combat zones. It is ghoulish and cruel in a way that even the preoccupation of women falling in love with Nazis in the women's historical fiction genre cannot necessarily aspire to; for as tacky as the proliferation of those historical romance novels comes across at times, they still give their female characters an existence outside of men, and even their male characters exist outside of their relationship with the women. It presupposes that women exist solely for male consumption; in this way, Emma is the same as Helen because her existence only matters when a man finds her attractive enough to be spurred into further violent action at the idea of the loss of her. Likewise, she is similar to Briseis in how she is treated by Norman's comrades and how Briseis is treated by other Achaeans in her position by Norman's side (even though there is no way to make a fair comparison between Norman and Achilles); the soldiers are foreigners to her, and she is

at the mercy of what they decide to do with her body. This points to a larger trend towards women who suffer in media, and it's that their suffering only matters when it can be used by men, or for men. The attitude towards who gets to have their pain validated in media—and particularly in war media—and those whose pain gets to be treated suggests that storytellers at large are unconcerned with the emotional states of their female characters in the same way that they claim to be very much concerned with creating “realistic” and “accurate” or “authentic” portrayals of suffering in their male characters.

The pain of a character like Briseis or Helen or Emma does not matter when it gets compared to the pain of Achilles and Priam and Norman—not for storytellers in the 20th and 21st centuries. This calls to mind Margaritis's question of authenticity; while she's posing the issue of responsibility in presenting the past to authors in the historical fiction, the question of responsibility in portraying past suffering matters in film even more so because of an audience perception that film is somehow closer to the truth than print media (Sontag), and because of directorial commitment to creating an “authentic” representation of suffering in war. When Ayer in interviews describes the lengths he went to in order to get the actors in *Fury* to behave as though they really were a tank crew in WWII, it leaves a gap on whether or not he as a director spent as much time considering the position of the women of Europe in WWII, too. He's just as responsible to his female characters as he is to his male characters as a director, and yet he still made the choice to relegate the suffering of those female war victims as fodder for expanded masculine suffering.

It may seem that women who, unlike Emma, appear and have some sense of agency in their actions complicate the presentation of women in these war narratives, and

to an extent, they do—Helen herself complicates the narrative of the Trojan War depending on whether the person adapting the story thinks she wants to be there or not. These women are still ghostly, still spectral figures, as in the case of the *Band of Brothers* episode “Bastogne.” Renee, a Belgian nurse, features and is, like Emma to Norman, one of the only people who is able to relate to or understand Doc Roe, Easy Company’s medic, by virtue of the fact that she too is often encountering wounds which she has no capacity to resolve, and she too is witnessing the death of young men on a constant basis in traumatic ways. While *Band of Brothers* is based on the actual experiences of the members of Easy Company, the fictionalization of real events still makes itself felt through the HBO miniseries, fitting it more genre and tone-wise alongside works such as *Fury* and, its immediate predecessor, *Saving Private Ryan* than it would alongside a documentary, even with the occasional introductions the miniseries has from the actual soldiers—now significantly older—describing what they experienced in an interview format. Therefore, it matters that the actress portraying Renee is conventionally attractive, regardless of whether or not the actual Renee (if she existed as she does in *Band of Brothers*) was or was not; it matters that one of the injured soldiers looks at her, then at Roe, and says, “I think I’m in heaven, Doc.” It matters that in the narrative of “Bastogne,” she—and not any of the men in the company—is who Roe is able to have a more immediate and intimate connection with through shared language and experience, the language being French and the experience being attempts to save the lives of men who are too injured to survive.

Roe is not belittled and emasculated by the other members of the company in the way that Norman is by the members of his crew, but he does experience it to a degree

when he's encouraged to stay back from combat patrol, and when he's incapable of performing his duty as a medic. Because of this—similar to Norman's lack of experience in the tank being a divisive trait—Roe is necessarily divided from the other men, and exists in a position where Renee is the only person (he thinks) to know what it's like to watch people die without being able to prevent them from being shot at in the first place. This is a fallacy on Roe's part, indicated in the scene immediately following his being asked to hang back; a soldier is shot and the other members of the patrol are unable to even go and recover his body as he lays in the snow, bleeding out from his neck, at risk of being shot themselves.

The audience is in the same position as Roe when it comes to knowing anything about Renee outside of the church which has been made into a makeshift aid station, but the audience knows much more about him than they do her because of what the miniseries is; Roe's grandmother was a Cajun *traiteur* or faith healer, who would put her hands on people and cure them of any illness, and then, as Roe describes, she would "talk to God about the pain she pulled out (36:04). Roe makes the active comparison between his grandmother and Renee, though the setting of the aid station and the earlier comment from the injured soldier assists in the work to imbue her with a sense of divinity. She attempts to reject the comparison when Roe claims that her ability to calm the injured men is a gift from God, but even several of the scene compositions in which Renee is working to stymie bleeding from wounded soldiers or is gathering supplies for Roe from around the church, there are subtle hints of halos behind her head as she is posed in front of the church iconography.

Renee *does* exist separate from Roe's experiences; she is witnessed during a supply drop in front of the church without the narrative needing to place Roe there to contextualize her presence. Yet, her experience of pain is something that is felt through conversation with Roe, and at the end of the episode, she meets a fate not so different from Emma when the church is destroyed in a bombing. All that is left behind of her is her scarf, and Roe is reminded that they are at war and no one person's safety—even if that person appears to be angelic—is guaranteed. He uses the scarf later as a bandage for fellow soldier Babe's hand (1:01:02), and is put into a position where he is now capable of doing the job he was trained for. No matter how saintly women are (or are not), they're still subject to the same end, and while the deaths of these characters isn't necessarily meaningless, per say, they're still used by the narratives as a way to incentivize male characters into action. Renee's implied holiness by location, wartime profession, and Roe's identification of her ability to calm people with her hands as a gift from God is a way in which the narrative takes a human woman and distances her from Roe and the men they're both working to heal; she is, like Helen, divine, but made so by Roe's (and the camera's) gaze. The elevation of the suffering of women is so constant that it feels as though women are always supposed to be suffering, and if they are not, then they are incapable of attaining any divine grace.

The problem is not that so many women in war narratives die, but, like Simone's example with comic books, that so few of them survive. Additionally, because these stories are being told through specifically male perspectives, the women are being filtered through the male gaze, rendering them in ways that make them appealing to the male characters and male audiences consuming the media. Renee's pain of caring for wounded

men may be verbalized, but it's done so to give Roe the opportunity to explore his own resentment of the role he has as an Army medic, and his resentment of himself for being unable to save others. He does not live up to his lineage; only women are competent healers until he can learn from Renee that he has the ability, too. Amma's pain remains inarticulate, unnecessary for the narrative and therefore unimportant to disclose or discuss. Through the injuring process of war, these women's worlds have been destroyed piece by piece, and then obliterated entirely upon their deaths. The women exist once they are interacted with, and then, once the narrative is through with them, disposed of.

Alternatives to Helen: Judith, Shosanna, and Women Who Fight

(Book of Judith; Inglourious Basterds; Sawyer "Dressing Up/Dressing Down"; Hammond and Busch)

There are women, like the Helens of war narratives, who witness violence and, and there are women who participate as combatants in violence. Victimhood is not restricted to one type of woman over the other. The privilege that Helen has over other women to not be taken as a slave by the Achaeans when they win battles also places her in a position where she is incapable of committing any major actions: as previously discussed, she is powerless against men, she is powerless against the gods, and she is powerless when it comes to how the war will end at all. Women in the *Iliad* largely do not fight; an exception may be made for Athena, but again, as Beard points out, Athena's womanhood is problematic because of what her function as a warrior figure. Likewise, women are not expected to fight in the contemporary war narrative. In America, it is easy to think of the war efforts of women in WWII as a homefront effort, even with the knowledge of spies overseas who were able to accomplish their missions *because* they were women, not in spite of the fact.

The Book of Judith is a war narrative in which its heroine is allowed to make moves in ways that Helen characters are not. She still has to operate in the context of her gender; her femininity is her primary weapon, and it allows her to win the war (to stave off invasion) in a way that traditional fighting—the particularly masculine version of war—is unable to do so permanently. In their introduction to Judith for the Norton edition of the KJV, Gerald Hammond and Austin Busch describe the book as “[anticipating] a trope of contemporary science fiction by offering an alternative history:

it takes place in a kind of parallel universe, with both similarities to and crucial differences from our own” (695), which makes the text easier to approach using the same tools one would use to approach contemporary literature. It also offers a parallel for a much more recent work—Quentin Tarantino’s 2009 film *Inglourious Basterds*, which, likewise, is a work of alternative history.

In Judith, fighting the encroaching Assyrian army—and its unrelenting general, Holofernes—via traditional warfare isn’t an option. They are unstoppable, and Holofernes is unwilling to negotiate. The goal is destruction: the destruction of nearby nations and their temples foretell what will happen to Bethulia if Holofernes and the Assyrians are not stopped. This echoes real-life loss, in the same way that the introductory scenes of *Inglourious Basterds* sets up the context for one of its main characters, Shosanna. Nazis have invaded France and are in the process of systematically finding Jewish refugees and killing them. Shosanna (played by Melanie Laurent) just barely manages to escape while the rest of her family is shot by Hans Landa (Christoph Waltz), an SS general.

When Judith is finally introduced, she is done so in a way consistent with the introduction of male heroes in the Old Testament: her heritage, like the genealogy of Abraham, is described. She had a husband, who died before they could have children, emphasizing a fear of bareness, of a lack of legacy, which is present in Genesis. Judith goes through a miraculous fasting period for “all the days of her widowhood” (Jdt 8:6), which is a period just longer than three years (Jdt 8:4). Yet, she, like Helen, is described as “very beautiful to behold,” something that is told about her before her devotion to God is disclosed. It could be implied that she is beautiful because she is devout, and this was

the argument made by early critics; if her weapon comes from God, then so too does her beauty, as it's her beauty which gives her the ability to trick and seduce (and ultimately defeat) Holofernes. Despite social progress which has been made regarding the perception of beauty and attractiveness (and that it is not the determining factor of a person's worth), there still remains a tug to associate "goodness" with beauty; Shosanna is beautiful and catches the interest of a Nazi sniper, about whom a propaganda film is made and slated to premiere at her theater.

Judith's attractiveness has in the past come under criticism, however, as beauty itself—the kind of seductive beauty—has also been ascribed to sinfulness. Women are put under obscene pressure to behave and appear a certain way, and when there is some deviation in conjunction with perceived female power—as Judith most certainly is a powerful woman—it becomes somehow easier to vilify them. It may be more interesting to think of Judith's beauty as malleable, as something that is transformed by God into whatever Holofernes finds most attractive. The power becomes placed in the beholder in this case, an ability to transform the woman who is being viewed into someone more covetable. Deborah Sawyer suggests that it's more likely that the vilification of beautiful characters like Judith has more to do with what male critics find appealing without the consideration that Holofernes could have been attracted to a "homely" Judith for different reasons than a more sexualized depiction of her. It's difficult to divorce beauty in women from their being sexualized, and this is a problem which is common to Helen as much as it is to Judith; it comes down to definitions of womanhood from without, and those definitions by men often fall back to whether or not the woman is desirable in a sexual ownership sense.

When Hans Landa reappears before Shosanna, there's some indication that he might be aware of who she is—a fear of discovery, of having escaped, of being killed permeates their interactions. Shosanna at the same time is trying to push off the interest of Daniel Bruhl's Frederick Zoller, unable to indicate in a meaningful way to him that she's not interested. He takes her aloofness in stride, assumes that it's because he's German and she's French and that she ought to find him unattractive because of this, rather than because he's a Nazi and she's Jewish, and actively trying to hide her identity. Shosanna exists in the thriller/survivor genre while Frederick functions as though he's in a romantic comedy. The tightrope of trying to politely decline a man's affections for fear that he could act out in his rejection (as he will, later, during the night of the premiere) is made more dangerous because of the setting.

It is, however, Frederick's interest in Shosanna which prompts him to beg Goebbels to use her theater as the location of the movie premiere. The seduction is less active than what Judith does, when she appears to willingly give herself up to Holofernes in order to gain access to his tent at night. Holofernes is just as ignorant as Frederick as to what women are capable of. He “waited a time to deceive her, from the day that he had seen her” (Jdt 12:16) without realizing that it was Judith who had been deceiving him all along; likewise, Frederick plans to use the premiere as a way to capture Shosanna, who instead, once finding out that she'll have the top brass of the Nazi hierarchy in her own theater, sets about a plan to set the building on fire with all of them trapped inside. It is inconsequential to Shosanna's story that the Basterds are also planning on killing the entirety of the Nazi high command during the film premiere, because she is ignorant of that plot, and their doing so does not change the fact that she literally has the last laugh,

as the propaganda film (a war narrative within a war narrative) cuts to edits she made of a video telling the Nazis that they are going to be killed by a Jew.

Even prior to the premiere, the audience is given a view of Shosanna getting into her own battle paint, not unlike the beginning of *Judith 10*, in which Judith prepares herself to be taken into Holofernes's camp. What Judith—and Shosanna—does is something akin to the way language has morphed: as she puts on her makeup, she is participating in a feminist reclamation of makeup as war paint. The preparation for the encounter with the enemy is necessarily different. Judith is unable to encounter Holofernes wearing the clothing of a warrior, and likewise, it would be inappropriate for Shosanna to go to the movie premiere dressed as a soldier. There is a futility implied by both narratives regarding the futility of traditional warfare: there is no way for Bethulia to withstand the Assyrian forces by fighting them, and even if there had been at one point, because of the siege (an event which Judith, having fasted already, is physically unaffected by) the citizens would be physically too weak to encounter the forces of an army already suggested to be far more powerful. Likewise, traditional warfare has not saved Shosanna's family. It has not kept her from living in a Nazi-occupied Paris. It is not even enough for the Allies, as indicated by the plan to have the Basterds blow the theater up, too. The traditional masculine warfare which requires direct injuring of others, while using the destruction of communities and the injuring of civilians as necessarily collateral to force the Enemy-Other to given in first, is something which does not work in either the Book of Judith or *Inglourious Basterds*. The Soldier-Defender is incapable of being a hero, and in this context, based on the representation of Frederick—who is a Nazi

war hero, and whose propaganda film is much more similar to American propaganda films—is actually the villain.

When Judith encounters the sleeping Holofernes and beheads him, the event is relatively quick and quiet. Compared to the several days which Judith spends in the Assyrian camp winning Holofernes's trust, the beheading is brief: it takes only a few lines. Yet it remains a physically exerting moment. Judith "took hold of the hair of his head," asks for more strength from God to commit the actual act of beheading, and "smote twice upon his neck with all her might, and she took away his head from him, and tumbled his body down from the bed" (Jdt 13:6-9). It's a fairly bloodless beheading, in the text; Judith doesn't need to clean herself and her maid up from the event though she spent a lot of time anointing herself in preparation. It's also something which seems to draw no attention from the other Assyrians; perhaps they too are drunk, like Holofernes, and unable to be roused. Perhaps God, in the same way He could have made Judith beautiful in a way that helped her accomplish her task, kept the others from hearing what was happening. In any case, Judith gets away. This is not the case for Shosanna, who is caught in the projection booth by Frederick, who attempts to force her into understanding and receiving his affections. He is unable to understand why she rejects him; he is, in his country, a war hero. The movie is about him. He should get the beautiful girl at the end of it. He is unable to comprehend the fact that a woman of an invaded country could harbor resentment at him and his people for invading the country in the first place. He is unable to comprehend that Shosanna might just not be attracted to him (she's involved with Marcel, who works at the theater and helps her execute her plan), or that her rejection is something even possible. Frederick assumes that Shosanna is, like so many other women

in these war narratives, both unable to reject the men who approach them, and also enamored with them when they show prowess in battle.

Shosanna shoots Frederick, who shoots back; they both die, and then the film reel cut comes on screen, and Marcel lights a fire behind it from the theater's store of nitrate film. In dying, Shosanna is sure that everything has gone according to plan. She had no intention of making it out of the theater house once the fire started. Her concern is not with a legacy, in the same way Judith's can be, but rather taking revenge, highlighting a very important difference between the behavior of Shosanna and the behavior of someone like Frederick, the Nazi Soldier-Defender. She is not acting because a commanding officer has told her to do so; her behavior does not stem from duty. While Judith has a duty, it is a duty to God, not a duty to the military structures—as the military structures fail at accomplishing the task of defense, and are even unsatisfactory in their ability to destroy and be done with the war. Both acts have in them a sense of finality: this is Shosanna's last act, and in doing so destroys the military command which threatened her own livelihood and destroyed her family (even if the act of marking Hans Landa for what he is falls to Brad Pitt's Lt. Aldo Raine). Judith is able to bring peace to her people, the book ending with Judith dying at the age of 105, and the statement that "There was none that made the children of Israel any more afraid in the days of Judith, nor a long time after her death" (Jdt 16:25) implies that because of Judith, there was no other attempt to conquer Israel.

These are of course subversions of the convention of how women are typically presented in the war narrative. More often than not, femininity is something that remains a constraint, something which prevents characters from being able to function. Yet here,

femininity is what allows Judith the ability to save her people from a war which has otherwise assimilated nearby nations into the Assyrian Empire, and femininity is what allows Shosanna to act in a way which permits her revenge narrative to be acted out. Conventional warfare has, in both cases, failed; seduction and the turning of the enemy's weapon against himself does work, however, and that seems to be the tool women are most likely to have afforded to them in war narratives. The propaganda film is just as much a weapon of the Nazis in the context of *Inglourious Basterds* as the gun, and it is fitting then for a woman in a war revenge narrative to take revenge by setting the film on fire. That characters like Judith and Shosanna exist, however, suggests that there are means in which women are allowed to act within the war narrative, separate from how the Helen characters are restricted from action and from committing violent acts.

Conclusion | Restrictions of the Archetypes and Further Considerations

Obviously in the real world, when women are in combat zones, they are not restricted to the two roles of Helen or Judith, and, even more importantly, women are capable of being more than one thing at once. If the Soldier-Defender has many different facets to his personality—and is allowed to explore them in countless different narrative scenarios beyond the traditional war narrative, then there is really no reason why the Helens and Judiths shouldn't be given the same narrative consideration. There's a statement that George R.R. Martin made regarding his alleged ability to write female characters well, and it's that, he says, he writes them as people; that assumes of course that Martin's treatment of his female characters is particularly good in comparison to other sci-fi and fantasy texts, or in comparison to media at all, and the bar is set so low for the representations of women that it's permissible for male authors to make such statements. The tradition is, as Gail Simone pointed out, to disregard the female characters or otherwise not give them narrative value as characters but rather as plot objects, so when anyone appears to do differently, even if they aren't doing all that much differently—Tarantino, for all that his Shosanna is an inversion of how women get to behave in war narratives, is guilty of treating his female characters and the women playing them poorly—it still feels like an enormous change to be paid attention to. This is the case in the war narrative, as much as it is in the related superhero genre. The works themselves do not even necessarily have to be that critically *good* as much as they just need to exist in the first place.

By and large, however, there's still major restrictions placed on women and their function within war narratives, and those restrictions do date back to how Helen is

permitted to move in the *Iliad* and its related texts. Since so much of American culture is fixated on idealized pasts—whether it’s an idealization of the Classical, or an idealization of previous eras in American history—part of the issue which should be addressed in order to see any kind of change in the representations of women in war narratives and related media is the need to rethink how audiences and storytellers look at the past in the first place, and whether or not they’re willing to be critical of the stories which have been told before them. Without that critical approach—which Simone and DeConnick offer for comic books, and which Scarry and Sontag both offer for war and depictions of violent acts (and their aftermath)—there can be no move beyond a dichotomy in which women exist as objects to be consumed, or must use the things which render them objects to retaliate against men who would objectify them in the first place.

Additionally, the American experience is one which is told not necessarily through historical texts or sociological research, but through stories which themselves become fictionalized. There does exist a kind of responsibility on behalf of storytellers then to be accurate; what that accuracy means is a problem, especially when the storytellers whose voices are being given the most prominent spotlight are men who are often not challenged to see the world through a perspective beyond themselves. It is not bad for people to want to write the stories and tell the stories which they themselves want to read and experience; this is a big reason why there’s the impulse to tell stories in the first place. It is, however, a problem when the stories of women who have been in combat situations and who have experienced that violence first hand are ignored in favor of a mythologized Soldier-Defender whose pain is the primary experience with whom audiences should be expected to sympathize because his pain is the experience with

which the storyteller identifies. Art challenges audiences to see beyond themselves; otherwise, there really is no point to it. There's also a problem of insisting on portraying women as love interests and objects when those stories have been told ad nauseum, to the extent where they aren't providing that much more to the collective of war narratives besides reinforcing the extreme masculine power fantasies which war narratives and related genres tend to fuel. When storytellers do provide subversions to those conventions, they are not only proving that there is a way to tell the war narrative without reducing and dehumanizing the female characters in it, but they are also challenging other storytellers to do better.

The archetypes of Helen and Judith cannot be unilaterally applied to every single character; there are some female characters who do exist outside these boxes, and there are female characters who have elements of both. Helen herself is a problem. Yet they provide the means with which to begin talking about the representations of women in war narratives and, by extension, the representations of women in related narratives. These are the conventions which are at play and have been in play in the genre for years, and over that time, they are just as likely to change or grow depending on who is telling the story—as they should.

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